The politics of language: Conflict, identity, and cultural pluralism in comparative perspective

By Carol L. Schmid


Reviewed by Marsha Howlett

Schmid’s book is specifically about language, national identity and pluralism in the United States. A main contention of the book is “that national identity and speaking accentless English are intertwined” (p. 75). By discussing the discriminatory treatment of Spanish speakers, whether immigrants or citizens in Puerto Rico, and by examining the recent furore over Ebonics in California, the author attempts to show that language difference and racial intolerance are linked. She also tries to prove that English-Only groups are defining acculturization as a shedding of the mother tongue as they lobby to make English the legal official language of the United States.

In two of the nine chapters, Schmid compares and contrasts language accommodation (or lack of it) in the United States with language situations in Canada and Switzerland. Opposing those who warn of a possible Quebec-like separatist movement in the United States, she demonstrates through a historical summary and graphs of Canadian attitudes that “the bilingual and bicultural nature of the Canadian state is the most important single factor differentiating it from the United States” (p. 121) and that fact militates against a separatist movement. Her discussion of multilingual Switzerland leads her to hope that language policy in the United States could emulate the Swiss recognition that groups and not only individuals have rights in language politics.

After taking the reader through the “myth” of monolingual history in the United States, setting up tables in the book to prove that attitudes toward English of immigrant groups are positive, and showing the strength of recent English-Only laws and movements, the author concludes that English is not under threat as the de facto official language of the United States. She bemoans, however, the victory of Proposition 227 in California “which essentially limits help to nonnative speakers to a year of intensive English instruction…”(p. 159) and which “officially ended most bilingual classes in California” (pp. 167, 172). She is a strong supporter of the “correlation between proficiency in a child’s native tongue and long-term academic success” (p. 165). Schmid
remains convinced that although non-English-speaking immigrants have more legal protection now than in the past, there “is not an entitlement to language rights…either under the U.S. Constitution or under the major federal statutes” (p. 74).

Schmid’s book is most relevant to those working in a North American context. More specifically, if some are working to promote bilingual education or other language programs, the author’s legal discussions of language laws and court cases in the United States might be helpful.