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BOOK REVIEW

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## **Alexandre Duchêne: Ideologies across Nations. The Construction of Linguistic Minorities at the United Nations (Language, Power, and Social Progress)**

**Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin and New York, 2008,  
xi + 82 pp, €98.00, ISBN 978-3-11-020583-1**

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In *Ideologies across Nations* Alexandre Duchêne shows how and why the idea of minorities has been constructed at the United Nations (UN). Through a thorough survey of UN archives, the author lays out why the construction of minorities by the United Nations should not be seen primarily in terms of human rights, but as a tool to protect nation-states, the constituent members of this *international* organisation. By tackling this topic in a consistently organised and elegantly written discursive analysis, Duchêne provides an innovative contribution to the current debates on multiculturalism, diversity management and trans- and sub-national governance.

In chapter 1, Duchêne presents the conceptual characteristics of ‘critical’ sociolinguistics by comparison with other research directions on language and minority issues. Most studies follow the conceptual approach initiated by Fishman (1972), based on a conception of language as a static and autonomous object of investigation and the assumption that languages can be identified and assigned to clear-cut categories (p. 6). However, the ‘critical’ approach stresses the complexity of language practices and rejects as monolithic those approaches that presuppose languages to be clearly demarcated. The assumption that a language can be clearly defined and contrasted with other idioms ought to be considered as a by-product of the same ideological movement that led to the emergence of the nation-states in the late nineteenth century (Heller 2002).

Chapter 2 presents the different discursive spaces of the United Nations where minority issues are debated. The author recognises that the UN system is based on strictly inter-governmental decision-making procedures. Although some consultative bodies, such as the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities or the Working Group on Minorities, include experts and representatives of civil society, all bodies with deliberative power, namely the

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General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Commission on Human Rights, include only representatives directly appointed by national governments.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, groups referred to as ‘minorities’ do not have any decision-making power as such in the UN institutional framework.

Chapter 3 presents the corpus studied, mainly consisting of summary records, the standard documents in which oral statements are concisely transposed into written texts, and the research methodology adopted: a detailed comparative analysis of transcribed oral speeches and their corresponding transposition into summary records. According to the author, ‘[t]he act of transposition is not neutral’ as it reflects an ‘ideology revealed in the manuals’ (p. 108), the implications of which need to be examined.

The three subsequent chapters study the genesis of three relevant international legal documents. Chapter 4 retraces the discussions that led to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1946. This text, widely considered as the cornerstone of the UN ideological framework, is characterised by the absence of any reference to minorities, a concept that was nonetheless present in documents adopted by the League of Nations, the international organisation that preceded the UN. This absence is not the result of lack of debate or the explicit desire not to recognise minorities, but of the absence of a commonly agreed, universal definition of minorities acceptable to the two competing ideologies of the time.

Chapter 5 describes the genesis of Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights adopted in 1966, in which minorities are mentioned for the first time. A clear-cut definition of minorities is absent and it is specified that the application of the article is restricted to ‘those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist’. Minority protection should therefore be viewed as a tool that nation-states can use to protect themselves rather than a basic human right. The author stresses the fact that this article *de facto* abandons the principle of universality (p. 260).

Chapter 6 studies the discursive background to the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities in 1992. According to Duchêne, the declaration does not challenge the ideological framework based on state interests and needs so that it may be considered as a ‘gauge of morality’ for nation-states (p. 256). Yet the establishment of a Working Group on Minorities, open to civil society, can be considered as ‘a solid form of hope’ (p. 257), as states are requested to show efforts to implement their commitments.

The core message of this book, in short, is that the ways in which ‘minorities’ have been constructed through discourse in the context of the United Nations serve to perpetuate a system of power based on nation-states even if the stated aim is to address the interests of those citizens covered by some undefined notion of ‘minority’. Since UN member states are typically more powerful than

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<sup>1</sup> In 2006, the United Nations institutions in charge of human rights underwent extensive reform with the establishment of a Human Rights Council directly accountable to the General Assembly replacing the Commission on Human Rights. The Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights was replaced by the Advisory Committee of the Human Rights Council, whereas the activities of the former Working Group on Minorities are now taken up by a Forum on Minority Issues.

representatives of minorities, Duchêne's work provides one more illustration of the fact that power relations unfold through discourse and through the validation, by structures of power, of the discourse of some actors. Instead of creating homogenous sub-groups (minorities) to tackle the tensions that can arise in heterogeneous settings (nations), Duchêne proposes to 'reject simplification and accept complexity' and to '[look] at minorities in terms of the processes that make them minorities' (p. 264).

Several issues, however, could have been explored further, such as the extent of what the analysis of the corpus chosen tells us about language—or languages. Duchêne notes that, in the debates at the UN, language was the most recurrent attribute used to define minorities. It was generally assumed that this attribute was 'a-problematic' by comparison with the more 'nebulous or even politically sensitive' national, religious or ethnic attributes (p. 171). Let us note that UN legal documents systematically mention ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities in the same phrase. Hence, whether discourse analysis on this corpus informs us specifically about *linguistic* minorities is open to question; so is, by implication, the choice of the book's subtitle, which mentions the construction of linguistic minorities. It is also intriguing that throughout the debates that Duchêne analyses in great depth, little attention, if any at all, seems to have been devoted by the participants in those debates to the actual effect that these legal instruments could be expected to have on the use of minority languages. It would have been interesting to spell out why and how the choices made (or not) to define minorities in one way rather than another affect minority languages and their users. A very relevant observation, however, is that the absence of a definition of 'linguistic minority' in the UN legal framework offers fruitful terrain for studying the development of discourse on the management of diversity in the perspective of global governance.

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## Author Biography

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