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BOOK REVIEW: TRANSMITTING MINORITY LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

This book review discusses a publication from France that evaluates the challenges confronting minority languages and their mediation. The contributors primarily examine the Romance language area and its neighboring language varieties. These include especially the languages and dialects in France and Belgium. An additional focus is on educational challenges in Haiti and South Africa. The anthology shows that comparative studies of minority languages can enhance our understanding of linguistic, social, and geopolitical developments in individual countries.

Keywords: *Minority Languages, France, Language Didactics, Book Review.*

Stéphanie Noirard (dir.). Transmettre les langues minorisées : entre promotion et relégation. Préface de Wesley Hutchinson. Collection « Rivages linguistiques ». Rennes : Presses universitaires, 2022. 232 p. ISBN : 978-2-7535-8185-2

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Minority languages comprise an important field of research that has increasingly garnered attention in recent years. Nowadays, at least in Europe, there is scarcely a country untouched by the challenge of managing linguistic diversity. Mixed idioms, which have emerged over the course of time, also continue to arouse the interest of linguists. Many

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such minor languages have been systematically described, objectively analyzed, and taught in various ways – but how is it possible, in a globalized world, to revitalize and disseminate languages that have been marginalized or even suppressed over long periods of time? The volume under review addresses this problem by looking at very diverse linguistic and cultural areas. While the focus is on French alongside other Romance varieties and their contact zones, it also explores Slavic, Celtic, Germanic, and non-European phenomena and evaluates the possibilities and limitations of language mediation.

Following a brief foreword by Wesley Hutchinson (pp. 9–15), editor Stéphanie Noirard explains in the introduction that the book originated from an international symposium, whose aim was to adopt a multidisciplinary approach to the question of how language teaching succeeds and what hinders it (p. 18). A summary of the volume's individual contributions follows (pp. 18–20), which are organized into three thematic blocks.

The first section is dedicated to the tension between language and politics, a field that has seen numerous contrastive studies conducted in recent years, while critically evaluating the influence of political ideas and their impact on the use of various languages (see Lisek 2014, Hacı 2022, Henzelmann & Hacı 2025: 110–112). In this vein, Klaus Bochmann's study addresses the linguistic situation in the Republic of Moldova and in Ukraine. He notes that Moldova's numerous minorities are often confronted with challenges inherent to trilingualism (p. 31) and points out that the situation in Ukraine has been further complicated by systematic restrictions on the linguistic rights of Hungarian and Romanian minorities since the 2000s (p. 32). This cautionary assessment is followed by Salah Ait Challal's paper on Tamazight in Algeria, which highlights the attempts made at standardization of Berber languages in the country. The author comments on the linguistic and social status of the individual varieties and emphasizes the problems that imposing unified norms of use upon divergent Berber idioms would entail (p. 46). Next, Renauld Govain explores the social and institutional role of Creole in Haiti. He analyzes the use of this language variety in relation to Standard French and identifies domains in which one or the other language is preferred. Whereas Creole dominates at practically all levels in the domestic and social environment, French is primarily used as the language of legal communication (p. 51, 54). Although Creole enjoys constitutionally enshrined language rights, the functional separation of the two languages indicates that they do not coexist on an equal footing (p. 60). Patrick Gormally then poses the contentious question of whether Irish is truly a minority language (p. 63). This inquiry is especially pertinent, given that Irish holds official status in Ireland yet is rarely used outside the state's school system and a few other institutional contexts (p. 64).

Notably, the first part of the book addresses a wide range of phenomena but, at the same time, reveals that similar challenges are faced in many parts of the world with respect to the acceptance and teaching of minority languages. In the volume's second thematic block, the focus is turned up even more sharply on schools and other educational

institutions. Argia Olçomendy and Jean Casenave examine the situation of Basque in France and compare data on its diffusion to the situation in Spain. According to the statistics, bilingual teaching in France has yielded measurable success for its minority languages, and the wider population's attitude towards Basque is also predominantly positive (pp. 86–87, 93). The following study, conducted by Guerlande Bienaimé, investigates school education in Haiti against the country's colonial background, emphasizing the manner of coexistence that has developed between Creole and French (p. 114). Cécile Perrot then evaluates the status of the numerous minority languages in South Africa. According to her data, only the European-based languages – English and Afrikaans – are experiencing an increase in their use, while all other languages are stagnating or declining (p. 117).

In this second part of the volume, we are thus confronted more closely with the conditions anchored in the education systems of different states. It is obvious that the situation in France offers more opportunities for minority languages than, for example, in South Africa or in Haiti. One should add at this point that not only structural differences require effective management, but that financial resources can be decisive. As we know, France is considerably wealthier than the other two countries, allowing it flexibility in financing its education system. Thus, language education and management are not solely matters of political or community will, but also shaped by the real monetary, geopolitical and social context. Even when a state chooses to strengthen the rights of a given language, a clear plan for funding this initiative is essential, and that is not always easy to achieve. For France, however, we see that bilingual education is now enjoying greater social acceptance than it did several decades ago, even if the educational approach to multilingualism ultimately reflects political viewpoints (cf. Erfurt & Hélot 2016: 30).

We now move on to the volume's third section, addressing current challenges in the documentation and maintenance of language varieties lacking an established literary norm. Maximilien Guérin examines the dialects of the so-called *Croissant*, the transition area between the northern (*langue d'oïl*) and southern (*langue d'oc*) dialect continua in France. Factors such as industrialization, social ageing, and migration away from this rural region have contributed to the decline of local dialects, while linguistic hegemony in the country has disadvantaged all language forms deviating from the Parisian norm since the French Revolution at the latest. This context has led to an *éradication des langues régionales* ("eradication of the regional languages", p. 131), a process that also affected Gallo in eastern Brittany, as explained by Dominique Deffain. However, this dialect is now increasingly used in editorial work, for example in literary production, and has even become visible in the regional linguistic landscape (pp. 154–155, 158). Remaining in the context of Brittany, Erwan Hupel then presents milestones in Breton literature (pp. 161ff.), before Pascale Erhart shifts the focus eastward, describing digital methods for recording and reproducing Alsatian dialects. These varieties are orally passed on from generation to generation, and this practice is steadily declining. In schools, only Standard German is taught, which does little to prevent the ongoing, widespread erosion of

competence in local dialects (p. 177). Alsatian thus remains largely confined to oral contexts, while literary German is preferred in education for historical, economic, and subjective reasons (p. 180). Accordingly, the experimental digital methods showcased for mapping dialectal structures inevitably yield highly divergent results (p. 189). The volume's final section concludes with two studies on Walloon: Philippe Boula de Mareüil and Lucien Mahin first present the linguistic atlas of Gallo-Romania, where sonorants take pride of place (p. 195ff.), whereupon Lucien Mahin then comments on his extensive work on Walloon and the associated challenges (p. 211ff.).

It should be emphasized that editor Stéphanie Noirard's concluding summary meaningfully situates the most important aspects of this volume in the context from which they emerged. Reference is made here to a previous colloquium at the University of Katowice in Poland in 2017, in which Silesian was also a subject of consideration. However, we need to keep in mind that the Silesian in question is not, as mentioned here, a *langue germanique* ("Germanic language", p. 225), but rather a Slavic variety closely related to Polish, which has absorbed numerous Germanisms and been undergoing a long-standing process of elaboration as a written language. Particularly noteworthy are the concluding observations on French outside France, where the language has suffered a fate – for instance, in certain Anglophone regions of Canada – similar to that of disadvantaged minority languages in France (p. 226). These insights underscore the value of a comparative perspective when addressing the topic of minority languages. Thus, striking parallels emerge in the treatment of numerous minorities in Europe and elsewhere, which must be placed in a larger context between the hegemony of state languages, geopolitics and historical understanding. This volume helps us to better understand these connections and shows how language attitudes can shift within various state structures. The book is therefore useful for anyone interested in minority issues and their place in education.

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