

*Paths to Post-Nationalism: A Critical
Ethnography of Language and Identity*
by Monica Heller

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Life for francophone Canadians is complex. Unlike its position in other francophone societies, French in Canada is a minority language spoken by only 23% of the population. These speakers face constant tensions, such as when and how to use French, how to interact with non-speakers, and what to do with new terminology. Like other languages in minority situations, Canadian French is in a state of crisis, due to restricted opportunities to use the language. French Canadian identity is under threat as a result.

This is Monica Heller's manifesto, which arrives in the closing pages of a book chronicling the socio-economic changes that have taken place in Canada over the last century. Like other Western countries, Canada has become increasingly post-nationalist (i.e. a country in which national identity is no longer of such importance). Heller is Professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, and has spent many years examining questions of language and social identity, and the role language plays in the construction of social difference. Although forming part of the series Oxford Studies in Sociolinguistics, *Paths to Post-Nationalism* is not strictly a sociolinguistic study. Rather, it is an extended essay extolling the benefits of ethnographic approaches – the examination of human customs, habits, and points of difference – to the study of social change.

It describes a number of the more important sociolinguistic studies with which the author has been involved over the last three decades.

Paths to Post-Nationalism is a revealing and well-documented account of the changes that have taken place in francophone Canadian consciousness over the last 100 years. The relationship between language and social relations is considered from the outset. Heller argues from the very beginning for a change in sociolinguistic enquiry, away from a view of sociolinguistics based on place and local communities and towards a view that more accurately reflects the increasingly global nature of modern society. She emphasises the importance of linking sociolinguistic phenomena over time rather than simply looking at each study in its own temporal context, an endeavour she certainly fulfils in this text. She traces the emergence of new ways of representing francophone identity, aside from those ways that emphasise nationalism and traditional values, and shows that the struggle over francophone identity is ongoing. Heller raises interesting points about the 'commodification of identity' in an age in which services and market values are extremely important; historic pageants and artisanal foodstuffs are marketed and sold, becoming vendible representations of francophone identity and culture. While obviously uncomfortable with this phenomenon, she attempts to place a positive spin on it by showing how francophones are carving out new niches for themselves in today's consumer society.

Although claiming to be an ethnography, *Paths to Post-Nationalism* is a theoretical text, with the first quarter of the book almost entirely devoted to definitions of sociolinguistics, ethnography and critique. It closes with the comment that an ethnographic approach 'can locate the discursive spaces and identify what resources are circulating, who has access to them, and what they make of them' (p.193). Through her

many examples, Heller indeed demonstrates this. The structure of the book is mostly built around previous case studies which trace the historical development of post-nationalism. The first chapter is excellent; Heller concisely makes her case in favour of ethnography and gives a detailed summary of the case studies which follow in chapters three to seven. The first case study, which appears in chapter three, is a particularly interesting examination of the rise and fall of a francophone secret society, and is full of political twists and turns. The discussion then moves on to a treatment of the power relations Heller observed at play while conducting ethno-linguistic research in a Montreal factory in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Chapter five focuses on the emergence of francophone rights in the education system between 1983 and 1996, while chapter six brings us to the 21st century with a discussion of the marketing of francophone Canadian products and identity. The final case study deals with the ways in which francophone space and identity have come to be redefined in recent years, with many admitting that francophone Canadians are on their way to *somewhere*, although the actual destination is unknown (Heller quotes on more than one occasion the francophone Canadian slogan: 'We don't know where we're going, but we're getting there').

One goal of *Paths to Post-Nationalism* is to show that ethnographic sociolinguistic studies can reveal great insights into society and culture. This goal is certainly reached, and for undergraduate students and members of the public interested in sociology and nationalism, *Paths to Post-Nationalism* is an accessible and enjoyable introduction to these areas from a well-respected expert in sociolinguistics and the sociology of language. However, for readers familiar with Heller's previous work, and other comments on ethnography, the detailed definitions and extended examples seem a

little flabby and come at the expense of innovative analysis and discussion. For example, in chapter two, Heller argues that language must be seen as a constitutive element of social processes and not merely a window into them, which is well exemplified in the case studies of the secret society and education. However, the remaining case studies appear to show the opposite: we see how changes in social conditions forced francophones to reassess their social position language choices. What Heller demonstrates is not a total shift towards a post-national sense of identity, but rather a reassessment of francophone identity, which continues to be based around the idea of the francophone self and the anglophone other. Further discussion of how language contributes to social processes would have been very welcome.

In many ways, *Paths to Post-Nationalism* successfully achieves what it sets out to do, by demonstrating the important role ethnography can play in sociolinguistics. Unfortunately, this is also its major weakness: a good opportunity to explore in great detail the state and possible future of francophone Canada is lost. Although clear definitions and examples are important, these are stretched to such an extent that this work at times reads like an introductory textbook to sociology. Indeed, it occasionally seems as though the reader's own ability to critically engage with the concepts under discussion is in doubt. This extends right to the final pages of the book, in which Heller again declares the complexity of francophone Canadian life, despite having highlighted this repeatedly in her case studies. Finally, Heller's insistence on the subjective nature of ethnography, and tendency to describe her data as a 'story' weakens the scientific basis of the book and thus reduces its academic impact. Those seeking an introduction to ethnography and sociolinguistics will enjoy the accessibility of *Paths to Post-Nationalism*

and learn a great deal from it. However, those seeking a critical ethnographic study of language and identity will be disappointed.

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