

FORUM

“Speak English”: A Comment on English Language Instruction in an Era of Neo-Nationalism

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Abstract

Previous research on neo-nationalism has largely focused on the political arena, analyzing voters, parties, and policies. The scholarship featured in this special issue moves beyond the analysis of neo-nationalism in contemporary politics to show how the ideology is enacted at the micro level. The stage for these dynamic interactions is educational settings related to the teaching of English. In this article, we comment on this new research that illustrates the variety of ways English language instruction can either advance or combat neo-nationalism. Despite the diversity of roles that English plays across different geographic and national-level contexts, this corpus of work makes evident the importance of language in maintaining national group boundaries. Inspired by this knowledge, we use data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) to explore how attitudes about speaking the national language are related to neo-nationalist stances cross-nationally. Our findings, which echo the micro-level evidence presented in the special issue, show that national languages are inextricably linked to the maintenance of national group boundaries and associated with neo-nationalist concerns about the erosion of national culture, economy, and political institutions due to perceived foreign threats.

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“If he sends us away. We are going to come back, because this is our country too.”

—Statement by third-grader in an English as a second language (ESL) classroom two months after Trump’s 2016 New Hampshire primary win (Stephens, 2023).

“He doesn’t like immigrants,” “He doesn’t like us,” and “He’ll send my dad away.”

—Statements by kindergarten students in a two-way immersion (TWI) classroom during a Presidents’ Day lesson in 2019 (Lima Becker and Oliveira, 2023).

NEO-NATIONALISM IS BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE

Identifying new forms of nationalism in today’s political environment is a relatively straightforward task—not least because there are so many examples: The electoral success of leaders such as Bolsonaro, Erdoğan, Modi, Trump, and Órban; popular support for policies designed to reduce immigration or to exclude foreign-born from welfare state institutions or national labor markets; public demonstrations by Proud Boys in the United States and similar groups elsewhere; and campaign promises to build or expand border walls are all instances of attempts to wield power within the political sphere to reify and sharpen divisions between “us” and “them.” As we have claimed in previous work (Eger & Valdez, 2015, 2019), such political actions are consistent with a form of nationalism aimed at boundary maintenance, which we term neo-nationalism.

Unlike classic nationalism, which seeks to align political boundaries with those of a group identifying as a nation, as in the case of Catalanian or Tamil movements, neo-nationalism occurs when a nation’s borders are established and largely accepted, both within the state and by international actors, but national boundaries are nevertheless perceived to be under threat (Eger & Valdez, 2015, p. 127; 2019, p. 384). When political borders are stable—a relatively recent phenomenon that became widespread with the decline of empires and the creation of modern nation states—the neo-nationalist project of tending to, emphasizing, reinforcing, and defending national boundaries can begin. This process is rarely benign, because it often occurs through processes of exclusion. Our prior work and that of our peers in sociology, political science, and cultural anthropology (e.g., Banks &

Gingrich, 2006; Höhne & Meireis, 2020; Svitych, 2022) has largely focused on the political arena through the lens of voters, political parties, and public policies. Recent research has also considered universities and higher education policy in the context of neo-nationalism (Brøgger, 2021; Douglass, 2021).

BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING SPACES

The authors in this volume expand upon that work to show us how neo-nationalist stances are present in the dynamism of everyday interactions. They move beyond the arguably easier task of identifying examples of neo-nationalism in contemporary politics to show how the ideology is enacted at the micro level, specifically in classrooms and related educational settings. The epigraphs to our commentary are powerful illustrations of this. They illuminate how the process of defining who belongs in a nation is not confined to political parties' election manifestos or citizens' voting behavior but spills over into everyday interactions, even in primary school classrooms. What these articles make clear is that neo-nationalism is performed and experienced by adults and children, teachers and students: It is a tension that manifests in the hallways and classrooms of schools across the globe. Furthermore, classrooms are microcosms that reproduce neo-nationalism intergenerationally, as the brief report by Chang-Bacon and Salerno (2023) shows.

Moving from the political arena to educational settings is only part of the story, however. Taken together, what the articles in this special issue demonstrate is that the relationship between teaching English and neo-nationalism is complicated! This is because English is currently *the* global language—an international language linking countries in the context of the current phase of globalization—but simultaneously, in some countries, English is the hegemonic language of a former colonial power that supplants local languages. Moreover, English is the national language of a minority of the world's countries, but in these places, primarily speaking English has long been seen as essential for national identity and cohesion. At the same time, English is a foreign, albeit powerful, language in the rest of the world, a potential threat to national languages everywhere (e.g., R'boul & Belhiah, 2023).

Indeed, English is both international and local, native and foreign, which has a variety of implications for the students and teachers engaged with it. For instance, when it is taught as a second language

(ESL), it may support a white-Christian ethnonational state, profoundly shaping the social identities of immigrant students and their families, as Stephens (2023) found. However, when taught as a foreign language, English may be perceived as a threat to the nation, making teachers of it vulnerable to threats of violence (see Windle & Rosa, 2023). Yet despite the diversity of roles that English plays, the common thread running through the articles in this issue is the salience of language in maintaining group boundaries.

NATIONAL LANGUAGES AND NEO-NATIONALISM

Reading these articles inspired us to examine how attitudes about language are related to the neo-nationalist agenda of boundary maintenance. Thus, in this section, we analyze the relationship between attitudes regarding the importance of speaking the national language and other social, economic, and political attitudes consistent with neo-nationalism. To do this, we rely on the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), a cross-national collaboration administering surveys on a wide variety of topics since 1984. The 2013 module on national identity (ISSP Research Group, 2015) is the most recent cross-national survey that asks about the importance of speaking the national language and has been validated in previous research on national identity (e.g., Gabrielsson, 2022; Larsen, 2017).¹ This survey also includes other variables indicative of neo-nationalism. Table 1 provides a descriptive overview of all variables we used in our analysis.

Independent Variables

Our key independent variable is respondents' views on the importance of speaking the national language for membership in a national community. The question asks respondents to rate, on a four-point Likert scale, how important speaking the national language is for truly being the country's nationality. Possible answers are "Very Important," "Fairly Important," "Not very important," and "Not important at all." We reverse coded responses so that higher values denote greater

¹ According to the documentation available on the ISSP website, this question is not included in the 2023 module on national identity currently being administered. While the motivation for this decision is not explained, we suspect that widespread agreement that language is very important for national identity makes it less useful in distinguishing among different types of national identities (i.e., the analytical distinction between ethnic and civic or voluntary and non-voluntary forms, e.g., Gabrielsson, 2022). However, excluding it from the battery of national identity items means analyzing this variable's relationship to other contemporary political attitudes and behaviors will not be possible.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics

Variables	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Dependent variables					
<i>Sociocultural</i>					
Index of anti-immigrant sentiment	44,582	3.05	0.82	1	5
Immigrants increase crime rates	43,039	3.36	1.18	1	5
Immigrants generally good for economy*	42,538	2.97	1.07	1	5
Immigrants take jobs away from natives	43,604	3.18	1.21	1	5
Immigrants bring new ideas and cultures*	42,992	2.88	1.09	1	5
Immigrants undermine culture	42,671	2.86	1.16	1	5
<i>Economic 1</i>					
Opposition to foreigners buying land	43,073	3.25	1.32	1	5
<i>Economic 2</i>					
Large international companies damage local business	41,289	3.57	1.07	1	5
<i>Political 1</i>					
International organizations taking too much power from the government	39,961	3.41	1.02	1	5
<i>Political 2</i>					
[Country] should follow decisions of international organizations*	40,614	2.88	1.03	1	5
<i>Political 3</i>					
Benefits from being member of the European Union*	24,352	2.85	1.11	1	5
<i>Political 4</i>					
[Country] should follow decisions of the European Union*	22,530	3.14	1.12	1	5
Independent variables					
<i>Importance</i>					
Importance of speaking national language for national identity	41,814	3.43	0.80	1	4
<i>Relative importance</i>					
Importance of speaking national language relative to other national identity criteria (ratio)	41,805	1.16	0.31	0.25	4
<i>Age</i>					
Continuous measure	45,133	47.25	17.45	15	97
<i>Sex</i>					
Binary measure	45,278	1.54	0.50	1	2
<i>Education</i>					
Continuous measure of highest educational degree	44,914	3.27	1.59	0	6

Note. An asterisk (*) denotes the wording of the question is positive (i.e., pro-immigrant). Higher values denote disagreement with this statement.

Source. 2013 ISSP ZA5950 (v2.0.0), <http://doi.org/10.4232/1.12312>.

importance. As Table 1 shows, across 32 countries, the average value for speaking the national language is 3.43, which indicates that individuals, on average, see it as rather important for membership in the national community.

In addition to language, respondents were also asked about the importance of other markers of national belonging: being born in the country; being a citizen of the country; having lived in the country

most of one’s life; belonging to a particular religion; respecting the country’s political institutions and laws; feeling that country’s nationality; and having the country’s nationality ancestry. Figure 1 illustrates what proportion of each country’s sample believes each of the criteria is “very important” for truly being a national. The proportion that believes speaking the national language is very important is highlighted in red. In over two-thirds of the countries, speaking the national language ranks first or second, demonstrating widespread agreement about its significance. Moreover, approximately three-quarters or more of respondents believe language is very important in the Philippines (80%), the United Kingdom (76%), Norway (76%), France (75%), the Czech Republic (75%), Switzerland (73%), and the United States (73%).

Although speaking the national language is considered very important by majorities in most countries, this does not necessarily mean that individuals rank it above other criteria. Indeed, individuals who see language as very important may see the other criteria, such as

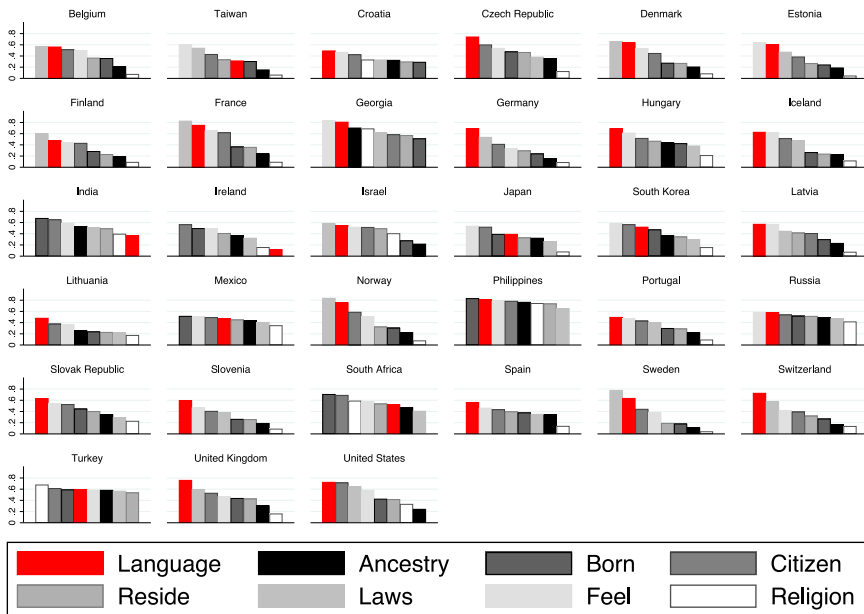


FIGURE 1. What is "very important" for being truly [NATIONALITY]?

Source: ISSP ZA5950 (v2.0.0), <http://doi.org/10.4232/1.12312>.

Notes: Bars represent the proportion of the sample that identified the criterion as very important (rather than fairly important, not very important, or not important at all). For the national identity battery, South Africa used a five-point Likert scale that included a middle “neither” option. While the South African sample is therefore excluded from the main analyses, we still report the proportion selecting “very important” in this figure.

ancestry or citizenship, as also very important. Some may identify *all* criteria as very important—the hallmark of someone with the most exclusive view of national boundaries. To ensure that we are isolating attitudes about language specifically and not merely capturing the exclusivity of national boundaries more generally, we use all markers of national belonging to construct a measure of relative importance: the ratio of the importance of speaking the national language to the average importance of the seven other criteria. Values below 1 indicate that speaking the national language is of lesser importance to the respondent than the average of the other items, while values above 1 indicate greater importance. 68% of the sample rates it as more important than other criteria, 17% as less important, and 15% perceive language as equally important to the other criteria. We include this ratio of relative importance in some of the models as a control. In some models, we also control for age, sex, and highest level of educational attainment.

Dependent Variables

For our dependent variables, we identify attitudinal variables in the data set consistent with neo-nationalist stances along sociocultural, economic, and political dimensions (see Eger & Valdez, 2019 for a similar approach using party manifesto data). Using a 5-point Likert scale, questions measure respondents' level of agreement or disagreement with statements regarding immigrants, international corporations, and international and multinational organizations. These measures, some positively and some negatively worded, are recoded so that higher values correspond with anti-immigrant sentiment, opposition to international or foreign presence in the national economy, and opposition to international or multinational organizations that may limit the sovereignty of countries. We use the average of the five attitudes about immigrants to create an index of anti-immigrant sentiment,² which reflects the sociocultural dimension of neo-nationalism.

Analysis and Results

We analyze the relationship between attitudes about the importance of speaking the language and neo-nationalist attitudes. Because we

² Statements about immigrants' perceived impact on culture, economy, and crime are often combined to create indices in empirical analyses of anti-immigrant sentiment (e.g., Eger, Mitchell, & Hjerm, 2022). The Cronbach's alpha for our five-item index is high, at 0.75, demonstrating internal validity.

have cross-national survey data, where individuals are nested in countries, we use multilevel mixed-effects linear regression models (Schmidt-Catran & Fairbrother, 2016; Snijders & Bosker, 2011).³ Figure 2 summarizes results from 21 models across our seven dependent variables. The shapes are point estimates for the key independent variable—the perceived importance of speaking the national language—and the bars represent the 95% confidence intervals. Circles indicate how well respondents’ beliefs about language predict sociocultural, economic, and political neo-nationalist views. Squares represent results for the key independent variable in models that control for the ratio of the importance of speaking the national language relative to other criteria. Diamonds are point estimates for the key independent

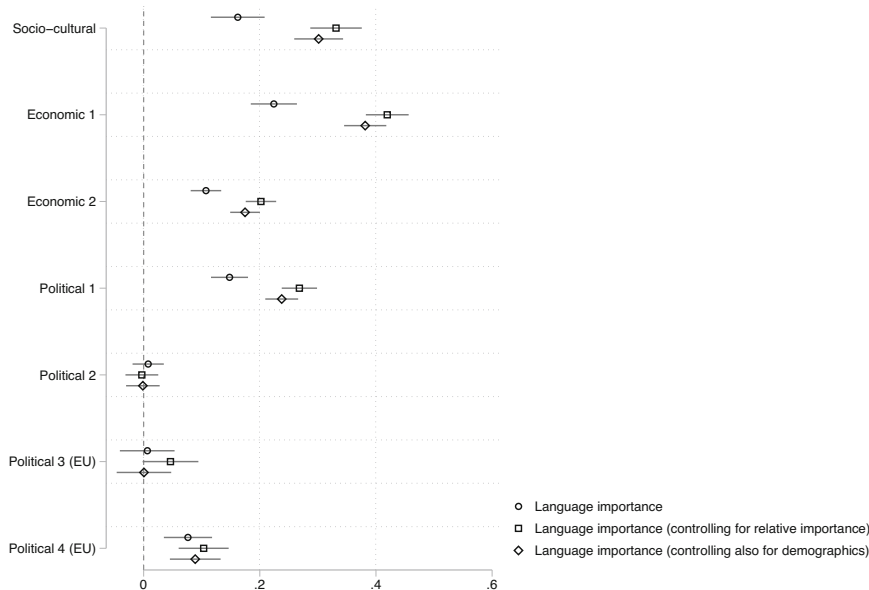


FIGURE 2. The Importance of Speaking the National Language for Nationality and Neo-Nationalist Stances

Source: ISSP ZA5950 (v2.0.0), <http://doi.org/10.4232/1.12312>.

Notes: Point estimates with 95% confidence intervals for the key independent variable for 21 models across seven dependent variables. Individual-level (N_I) and country-level (N_C) sample sizes for each full model — sociocultural: $N_I = 40,906/N_C = 32$; economic 1: $N_I = 39,622/N_C = 32$; economic 2: $N_I = 38,016/N_C = 32$; political 1: $N_I = 36,735/N_C = 32$; political 2: $N_I = 37,376/N_C = 32$; political 3: $N_I = 22,374/N_C = 23$; political 4: $N_I = 21,985/N_C = 22$.

³ Because we expect the relationship between our key independent variable, the importance of speaking the national language, and the dependent variables to vary across countries (e.g., because there is more than one national language in some countries), we also include a random coefficient for this independent variable. Although results are similar across models with and without the random coefficient, fit statistics indicate the models with the random coefficient are superior.

variable in the full models, which also control for respondents' age, gender, and highest level of education.

Results show that the perceived importance of speaking the national language is positively associated with a number of neo-nationalist stances. First, there is a clear relationship with anti-immigrant sentiment. There is an even stronger relationship with opposition to foreigners buying land. There are also positive relationships between the perceived importance of speaking the national language and the beliefs that large international companies damage local businesses and that international organizations are taking too much power from the government. Among respondents from EU countries, there is also a relationship between the importance of language and opposition to the notion that member states should follow decisions made by the EU. However, there is no significant association with the other two political views.

These analyses lend credence to the notion that language is a prominent signifier of national group boundaries and its perceived importance is consequential for sociocultural, economic, and political neo-nationalist stances that emphasize national group boundaries. Put simply, language is not only an especially salient marker of nationality but also relevant for the neo-nationalist agenda of defending national culture, economy, and political institutions from perceived foreign threats.

TEACHING ENGLISH TO ADVANCE OR COMBAT NEO-NATIONALISM

The work in this volume contains case studies encompassing a variety of ways that teaching the English language can be deployed either as a tool for or against neo-nationalism. Our own analyses show that, across cultures, language is an important signifier of national group boundaries, and this collection of articles draws attention to the important role the English language plays in maintaining boundaries stemming from national identities. Specifically, these articles provide important insight into *how* English language instruction reifies or challenges neo-nationalist ideologies in daily interactions.

Like any language, in the places where it is the mother tongue, English serves to define who is and who is not a “legitimate” member of the nation. Where it is a residue of colonialism, it invokes a unique duality—a compulsion to learn English, in hopes of propelling mobility through institutions still marked with the vestiges of the occupier, paired with a repulsion rooted in the desire to discard the hegemonic English language in favor of one's own, traditional native tongue. This is illustrated by Morgan and Ahmed (2023), who observe, “Now the

young people of Bangladesh are caught up between globalizing market forces, neoliberal language education policies that prioritize English, and a dream for Bengali linguistic nationalism sponsored by the state through rituals, memorials, and various forms of patriotic symbolism.”

Even where colonizing powers did not speak English, its adoption in a country today can delay recovery from occupation by imposing a new form of linguistic colonization, which may put language teachers in the position of having to “encourage what is local but not at the expense of what is global” (R’boul & Belhiah, 2023). This balancing act between globalism and nationalism must be particularly difficult in countries looking to strengthen national identity and independence post colonialism—which entails focusing on national languages—while also looking to spur economic and social development to combat the disadvantages of colonization—which may necessitate learning English.

Perhaps most importantly, the work in this volume also demonstrates how the English language and English language instruction can be used as a tool to combat neo-nationalism and its perpetuation. Stephens (2023) demonstrates how teachers can challenge neo-nationalist discourse in the classroom and encourage students to do the same. In addition to teaching English, offering identity-affirming course content is also important. Morgan and Ahmed (2023) argue that making students’ perspectives on nationalism prominent in course design enhances their confidence and sense of belonging. However, Lima Becker and Oliveira’s (2023) study reveals that accomplishing this is not always easy and that educators grapple with how to discuss the complex immigration experiences of students and their families. Because teachers can play an important role in countering neo-nationalist ideologies by linking educational content or micro-level phenomena occurring in the classroom to broader social contexts, Yazan et al. (2023) suggest that this link should be discussed early, during teacher training and education, while Hamid and Ali (2023) argue it is imperative that teachers take a critical approach.

English can also be used as a challenge to neo-nationalist ideology by allowing speakers to transcend the nation state. In Bangladesh, English instruction is linked to computer literacy and preparation for the labor market in a modern, secularized world (Hamid & Ali, 2023). As one survey respondent in Morocco said, “. . . we should be open to foreign languages and cultures so as to successfully become global citizens” (R’boul & Belhiah, 2023). In Turkish classrooms, some see English as “shared code, a potential equalizer”, capable of engendering empathy for Syrian immigrants (Yazan et al., 2023). While these classrooms are, in a sense, environments “set apart from the broader social milieu” where neo-nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiments are prevalent (Yazan et al., 2023), this does not mean that social

interactions within them are irrelevant. Social scientific research has long pointed to the transformative potential of positive intergroup contact, especially in classrooms, for the reduction of out-group prejudices (e.g., Allport, 1958).

CONCLUSION

As Gabriëlsson (2022) notes, although one's native language is not something one can control, learning a new language or improving one's language skills is a choice. In this way, language acquisition may provide access to a cultural affiliation and "affect opportunities to be classified as true members of a country" (p. 504). Our cross-national analyses confirm the relevance of language for neo-nationalism's socio-cultural, economic, and political dimensions and are consistent with the micro-level evidence presented in case studies in this special issue. The authors of these studies highlight the multitude of ways that neo-nationalist ideologies impact English language instruction and how language instruction can, in turn, either support or challenge those ideologies. Hamid and Ali (2023) write, "What is presented to teachers and students in schools and classrooms in the name of curriculum, textbook, and pedagogy is more than meets the eye; ELT is inherently ideological, serving various interests and agendas in local, regional, and global contexts." Indeed, language is a powerful signifier of membership in local, national, and global communities, and, depending on the context, the teaching and learning of English has the capacity both to strengthen and weaken national group boundaries. This volume is a much-needed contribution because it grapples with these complexities and contradictions. Importantly, it also extends our understanding of contemporary neo-nationalism beyond the political sphere but at the same time shows how this political ideology is reflected in everyday interactions.

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Authors contributed equally. Text: Maureen A. Eger, Sarah Valdez; Empirical analysis: Maureen A. Eger.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None to declare.

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