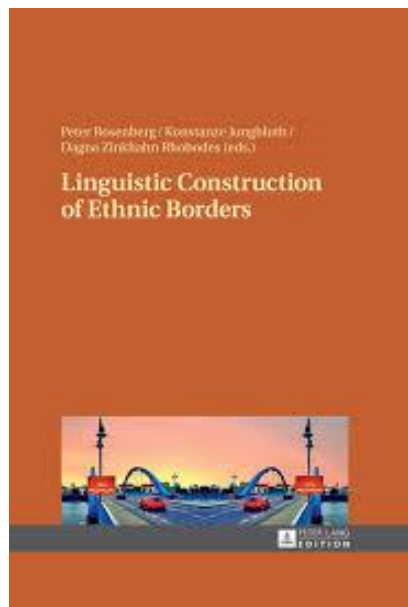




## Linguistic Construction of Ethnic Borders

Edited by Peter Rosenberg, Konstanze Jungbluth and Dagna Zinkhahn Rhobodes

Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang Edition, 2015, pp. 262



Review by Annarita Taronna\*

This volume, edited by Peter Rosenberg, Konstanze Jungbluth and Dagna Zinkhahn Rhobodes, provides its own contribution to the on-going debate concerning the establishment of ethnic borders and the extent to which linguistic choices play a pivotal role in the construction of ethnic identity. In addition, this volume sheds light on the socio-cultural factors that come into play within the process of identity preservation. Such a socio-cultural process, i.e. identity creation and preservation, is by no means a straightforward phenomenon that has to do with the administrative delimitation of borders beyond which no-one is allowed to settle, but is definitely a multifaceted process. The title itself, *Linguistic Construction of Ethnic Borders*, already represents a first attempt to introduce the reader to the complexity of the topic: how is it possible to observe language use and capture it in such a way as to define—and delimit—ethnic borders? And again: are borders actually ‘borders’ or do they represent the place where the actual language change takes place? These and many other answers can be found in this book, which consists of four macro-areas (i.e. ‘Group Boundaries and Identity’, ‘Ethnic Boundaries and Minorities’, ‘Boundaries and Language Islands’, ‘Language Borders and Discourse’), with contributions from scholars in the field.

The first section of the book, “Group Boundaries and Identity,” includes contributions on how language intersects with ethnic borders. The essay “Language Choice and Identity in Post-Soviet Armenia,” by Stefan Rabanus and Haykanush Barseghyan, talks about how the choice between Armenian and Russian influenced the Armenian identity construction in this crucial time of transition, and investigates the current positioning of Armenians towards the Russian language. The following contribution by Rita Vallentin, “Linguistic Strategies of Constructing Durable and Permeable Ethnic Boundaries in a Brazilian Quilombo Community,” looks into the border construction in the Quilombo Afro-Brazilian community, and identifies this

---

\* Annarita Taronna is Associate Professor of English and Translation at the Faculty of Education, Psychology, Communication, University of Bari. Her main research areas include gender in/and translation studies, cultural and post-colonial studies, use of ELF in migratory settings, language mediation in intercultural contexts, and the teaching of English as a second language (ESL). On these topics, she has published several articles both nationally and internationally.



duality as a crucial factor of in-group integration. Bernhard Brehmer's "The Cyrillic Script as a Boundary Marker between 'Insiders' and 'Outsiders: Metalinguistic Discourse about Script Choices in Slavic-German Bilingual Computer-Mediated Communication" analyses computer-mediated communication, with particular attention to scripts, in order to look into Slavic-German communicative strategies and how the Cyrillic script still represents a useful means to construct identity.

The second section of the book, "Ethnic Boundaries and Minorities," deals with the issue of coexistence between different ethnic groups within a community. Melikishvili and Jalabadze's article "Language and Ethnic Boundaries in Multiethnic Georgia" describes the two ways in which language creates boundaries: a tool for the creation of ethnic borders and, at the same time, a medium to bridge the gap between different ethnic groups. Similarly, Klessmann's "Roma school mediation in Germany—Its Effects and Limitations" offers an overview of the current situation in Germany, and considers the possibility to introduce Roma school mediation for a better integration of ethnic groups in Germany. Sascha Wölck and Christina Rogers are the authors of "Labeling difference—on discrimination and the social standing of children fathered by US soldiers during the Vietnam War." This essay focuses on the problematic positioning of the children of this war (born from romantic relationships, sexual abuse or prostitution), widely discriminated within the Vietnamese social system. The following contribution is "Linguistic borders—language conflicts. Pleading for recognition of their reality," which is written by Harald Weydt and has a more general approach, in the attempt of understanding how and why language conflicts emerge, and even more of reflecting on how these could be avoided.

The third section of the book, "Boundaries and language islands," deals with the way language is a powerful means for social inclusion and the promotion of new values. Here, the reader will find an essay signed by the editor Peter Rosenberg, "Anything goes? The gains and losses of the constructivist view on ethnicity: Some considerations based on German 'language islands' studies." The study focuses on language use in German-speaking communities in Brazil and Russia, with speakers living in close contact with the majority population: growing levels of integration have led to a decrease of distinctiveness and to a more widespread assimilation, especially among younger members of the community. Hans C. Boas's "Linguistic splits along religious lines: The role of language maintenance among Catholics and Lutherans in Texas" discusses how long these groups used German in church and why they then refused it in religious contexts in favour of the English language. In the chapter "Gray zones: The fluidity of Wisconsin German language and identification," Samantha Litty, Christine Evans and Joseph Salmons present evidence on linguistic features that Wisconsin speakers of German have had over the last several generations (from the beginning of the Nineteenth Century to the present day) and on how they see themselves socio-linguistically.

The last section of this book, "Language Borders and Discourse," is the more language-oriented part of the book, in which contributors discuss how language intersects with the issue of the representation of others or otherness. The opening essay is "Crossing the Border, Closing the Gap: Otherness in Language Use" by the editor Konstanze Jungbluth. This strongly theoretical contribution investigates "otherness" (especially linguistic) in all its aspects and definitions, and concludes that "acts of alterity are just the other side of all acts of identity, as language use is always directed towards the other" (p. 210). Rhobodes's "The permeability of language borders on the example of German-Polish language mixing" is emblematic, especially because the German-Polish dichotomy is still vivid today and can be easily spotted especially in social and educational contexts. To conclude the collection, Helena Topa Valentim problematizes the very existence of boundaries, as her aim is to discuss their role as a mental category within the potentially unlimited extension of language, in the chapter "Boundary, a metalinguistic concept at the core of language deformability."

This book, in its wide range of topics and contributions, provides very useful insights into the dynamics of border construction and, more specifically, it highlights once again how the actual fight for resistance and identity maintenance on the part of the autoctone (and non-autoctone) populations takes place on the border more than anywhere else, where the issues of social identity becomes more evident.

In its more theoretical parts, the volume provides a wide overview on the theorization and discussion of borders in several contexts. The authors also provide a remarkable number of case studies, which, although not necessarily focused on the English language, represent a rich set of methodological tools for



sociolinguistic investigation, thanks—among the rest—to its thorough and rigorous use and analysis of interviews.