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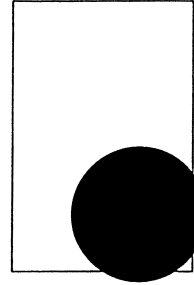
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# *Imagined Communities* reconsidered

Is print-capitalism what we think it is?

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## Abstract

This article critically evaluates Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991), arguing that the book's popularity partly derives from its resonance with widespread, deep-seated western notions of language, especially oppositions between print and orality in terms of their relationship to cognition, emotion, history, and nationalism. The article gives reason to reconsider reactions to Anderson's book and argues for a more sustained focus on the relationship between nationalism and linguistic ideologies.

## Key Words

*Imagined Communities* • linguistic ideology • literacy • nationalism • print-capitalism

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991) is undoubtedly one of the most influential recent texts on language and national identity, and its warm reception by diverse scholarly communities has certainly been well justified: Anderson's book has brilliantly illuminated the cultural dimensions of nationalism, particularly the role of print-capitalism, and in doing so has inspired waves of important new research on questions of nationalism. However, it is precisely this overwhelmingly positive reception of Anderson's book that I think deserves critical reflection. In particular, I will argue that the popularity of *Imagined Communities* (hereafter referred to as IC) is due, at least in part, to its resonance with certain deep-seated, western views of language. This argument extends previous criticisms of Anderson, and it should give readers reason to check their reactions to this text. At the same time, I advance the positive message that linguistic ideologies themselves can and should be a focus of research on nationalism.

Let me make it clear at the outset that this sort of review does not in itself repudiate Anderson's text; such repudiation would require a combination of ideological arguments *and* empirical, evidentiary arguments about individual points, and, while I sometimes note factual inaccuracies in IC, my argument is ultimately about readers' reception of

the text. Ideally, then, this critique should be read in conjunction with previous critical reviews of IC (Balakrishnan, 1996: 204; Chatterjee, 1993; Coleman, 1996; Gal and Irvine, 1995: 995, note 3; Herzfeld, 1997: 5–6; MacLaughlin, 1988; Rosaldo, 1994; Segal and Handler, 1992; Silverstein, in press; Smith, 1991), many of which I will refer to in this article. In any case, such criticisms of IC should serve to indicate that the book's popularity cannot be accounted for strictly by the strength of its empirical evidence, and, therefore, that it is worth exploring other explanations. Toward this end, I will begin by reviewing Anderson's text, demonstrating the way it is premised on a fundamental opposition between print and orality, and then I will demonstrate its resonance with western language ideologies.

### PRINT VS ORALITY

In this section, my goal is simply to outline the print–orality dichotomy that pervades IC, so the analysis is based on a close reading of this text. However, along the way, I will also sometimes point to factual errors or interpretive shortcomings in Anderson's text. These criticisms are not fundamental in themselves, and, though they would normally not appear in a review of this sort, they are included here because they serve to indicate the skewed nature of this text, supporting the larger point about the patterned contrasts between orality and print in IC.

\* \* \*

Obviously print plays a central role in IC, as reflected in the mantra in scholarly publications that 'print-capitalism creates the imagined community of the nation'. However, what is often missing in such adaptations of IC is recognition of the way the argument also involves oral language in addition to print-capitalism. I would argue, in fact, that IC is premised on a fundamental opposition between print and orality, according to which orality acts as the negative space or binary term against which all of the arguments about print make sense. To be specific, print is associated with cognition, universalism, monolingualism, and permanent memory, whereas orality is paired up with its opposites: emotion, particularism, multilingualism, and transience. Partly because print dominates so much of the discussion, these oppositions are not immediately apparent, and yet, on closer inspection, they become readily discernible.

First, it is clear that Anderson links print with cognition, since print accounts for the major cognitive transformations that engender imagined, national communities: above all, the crucial changes in conceptions of time – from messianic to simultaneous, homogenous time – are attributed to the reading of novels and newspapers; in addition, the awareness of fellow citizens is attributed to the daily consumption of newspapers. But it is precisely against this backdrop that the isolated discussions of orality emerge as the exceptions that prove the rule, revealing the dichotomy between print and orality that underpins the entire book. In particular, Anderson consistently argues that print is only what allows the nation to be conceptualized, whereas oral language gives it emotional force; or, put differently, print allows us to imagine the nation, while orality makes us love and die for it.

This opposition emerges most clearly in Chapter 8, 'Patriotism and Racism', where Anderson returns to his initial, riveting question about why people are willing to die for an abstraction like the nation. Raising this question in the opening lines of this chapter,

Anderson neatly distinguishes between cognition ('consciousness') and emotion ('attachment'): 'But it is doubtful whether either social change or transformed consciousness, in themselves, do much to explain the *attachment* that peoples feel for the inventions of their imaginations – or, to revive a question asked at the beginning of this text – why people are ready to die for these inventions' (1991: 141, emphasis in original). Anderson's solution is to 'return once more to language' (1991: 144), but, in utter contrast with other chapters' focus on print, this time the 'language' he has in mind is decidedly oral. In this chapter, Anderson makes it clear that *oral* language provides the emotional attachments that inspire sacrifice for the nation, whereas print merely provides an enabling condition, i.e. the cognitive structure for imagining or conceptualizing the nation. While not explicitly labeled as such, the emphasis on oral language is apparent in the examples of 'language' used throughout this chapter, such as the following four examples:

- (1) [T]here is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests – *above all in the form of poetry and song* (1991: 145, emphasis added).
- (2) At the same time, nothing connects us affectively to the dead more than language. If English speakers *hear* the words 'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust' – created almost four and a half centuries ago – they get a ghostly intimation of simultaneity across homogenous, empty time (1991: 145, emphasis added).
- (3) The lines [of the poem, *The Burial of Sir John Moore*] celebrate a heroic memory with a beauty inseparable from the English language – one untranslatable, *audible* only to its speakers and readers (1991: 146, emphasis added).
- (4) What the eye is to the lover – that particular, ordinary eye he or she is born with – language – whatever language history has made his or her mother-tongue – is to the patriot. Through that language, encountered *at mother's knee* and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures are dreamed. (1991: 154, emphasis added)

Visceral experiences and memories of oral language, in short, furnish emotional attachment to the nation, making people willing to die for it. Anderson's conviction about orality's strong emotional force even leads him to make the dubious argument that 'The dreams of racism have their origin in ideologies of *class*, rather than in those of nation . . .' (1991: 149, emphasis in original). While previous critics (Gilroy, 1987: 44–5; Segal and Handler, 1992: 8–12) have rightly pointed out this position's Eurocentric biases, it should be noted that these biases are also intimately tied up with the assumptions about orality. For example, after arguing that nationalist cultural products almost always express love rather than hate (the emotional mode of racism), Anderson implies that nationalist hymns (oral language) always express love when he rhetorically asks, 'Can the reader think immediately of even three Hymns of Hate?' (1991: 142, footnote 2).<sup>1</sup>

The important point here is that Anderson himself believes that dying for the nation is explained by oral language, *not* print. In short, for Anderson, oral language creates

emotional attachment to the nation, whereas print creates the necessary cognitive transformations. If any doubt remains about this print–orality opposition, recall the way a similar orality–print *and* ‘attachment-versus-consciousness’ distinction is made in Chapter 4, the chapter on early Latin American nationalism. Here, Anderson again raises the question of how to explain sacrifices made for the nation: ‘... market zones, “natural”-geographic or politico-administrative, do not create attachments. Who will willingly die for Comecon or the EEC?’ (1991: 53). Rejecting previous explanations for sacrifices made in the name of the emerging Latin American nations, Anderson insists the answer must be sought in terms of ‘emotion’ (1991: 51), ‘attachment’ (1991: 53), and ‘meaning’ (1991: 53). Furthermore, much like the chapter on patriotism discussed earlier, these emotions turn out to depend on oral language: in this case, the face-to-face, oral communication that inevitably develops during administrative pilgrimages to metropolitan centers. After having presented this answer, a distinct switch is then made to the question of cognition, i.e. consciousness altered by print:

Our attention thus far has been focussed on the worlds of functionaries in the Americas – strategically important, but still small worlds. Moreover, they were worlds which, with their conflicts between *peninsulares* and Creoles, predated the appearance of American national *consciousness* at the end of the eighteenth century. Cramped viceregal pilgrimages had no decisive consequences until their territorial stretch could be *imagined* as nations, in other words, until the arrival of *print-capitalism*. (1991: 61, emphasis added)

Thus framed as a question of ‘consciousness’, Anderson goes on to discuss print’s effects on consciousness of time and community, keeping with his earlier discussion of novels and newspapers (1991: 22–36). In other words, emotional orality is once again distinguished from cognitive print, a pattern consistently maintained throughout the book.

The oral–print dichotomy, in fact, includes two other related terms: orality is also portrayed as particularistic and multilingual, and print as its opposites. Especially since Anderson sees monolingualism as the *sine qua non* of an imagined community (more on this later), multilingual and particularistic orality is perceived, at one level, as an inherent threat to the nation, though still necessary at the emotional level to generate attachments to the nation. Anderson clearly says both print and oral language are needed for imagined communities, but the important point is to note the consistent pattern that emerges in these contrasting depictions of orality and print’s functions, to see how these contrasts form a unified whole.

The view of orality as particularistic is mainly revealed by omission: the fact that most of the book is about print and national unification, whereas orality is hardly ever mentioned outside the passages about emotional attachments already noted. However, in addition to those passages, there are at least two other places where orality’s particularistic nature is asserted. First, orality surfaces in the description of medieval Christianity:

We are faced with a world in which the figuring of imagined reality was overwhelmingly visual and *aural*. Christendom assumed its universal form through a myriad of *specificities* and *particularities*, this relief, that window, this sermon, that tale, this morality play, that relic. While the trans-European Latin-reading clerisy was one

essential element in the structuring of the Christian imagination, the mediation of its conceptions to the illiterate masses, by visual and *aural* creations, *always personal and particular*, was no less vital. The humble parish priest, whose forebears and frailties everyone who *heard* his celebrations knew, was still the direct intermediary between his parishioners and the divine. (1991: 23, emphasis added)

In this passage, Anderson links orality to particularistic localism, the enemy of national unification. This description of aural Christianity serves as a 'before picture' of the pre-print world, which is immediately contrasted with the new historical consciousness – of empty, simultaneous time – that developed from reading novels and newspapers. These changes, amounting to a 'Foucauldian sense of abrupt discontinuities of consciousness' (1991: 28), are built on oral-literate comparisons: '*Noli* [the prototype of the new consciousness of simultaneous time] was meant to be read, while *Florante at Laura* [prototype of the old consciousness] was to be sung aloud' (1991: 28). Thus, added to orality's emotionalness is its particularism, which is opposed to print's ability to change consciousness of time and therefore overcome particularism.

Much later, in the 'after picture' of the post-print world, orality resurfaces in a discussion of electronic media and 'the last wave' of 20th-century nationalisms:

Multilingual broadcasting can conjure up the imagined community to illiterates and populations with different mother-tongues. (Here there are resemblances to the conjuring up of mediaeval Christendom through visual representations and bilingual literati). (1991: 135)

Anderson's parenthetical statement about broadcasting's 'resemblances to the conjuring up of mediaeval Christendom' makes it clear that the two language forms are equated as examples of multilingual orality. But why does Anderson assume that electronic broadcasting is multilingual unless he believes that orality is ipso facto multilingual? This assumption is factually incorrect: monolingual broadcasting in a dominant language is actually quite common, especially given unequal control over broadcasting media. Throughout Latin America, for example, television and radio broadcasts have often been made in one dominant language, Spanish, notwithstanding the plethora of indigenous languages. This sort of oversight reveals again that Anderson equates orality with multilingualism, the persistent threat to national unification. In fact, his apparent concession to orality is also limited by the preceding sentence, which implies that 'broadcasting', even in the late 20th century, only provides a supplementary role to print: 'advances in communications technology, especially radio and television, give print *allies* unavailable a century ago' (1991: 135, emphasis added). In other words, the particularistic orality of Christianity and messianic time first had to be overcome with print; later, in the late 20th century, some multilingual broadcasting (orality) may be permissible without leading to the Tower-of-Babel syndrome only because print-language/nationalism has already been firmly established and continues to maintain itself through mass education systems (1991: 135).

What is also curious here is Anderson's assumption that nations need to reduce or eliminate multilingualism in the first place – in other words, the stress on the importance of having 'unified fields of communication' (1991: 44). Built into the argument is

a prejudice against multilingualism, which is considered incompatible with national unity. As Segal and Handler (1992: 7) aptly put it, 'Anderson assumes that a common language is a functional prerequisite for "communities", whether imagined as sacred or national. This is, in effect, to treat (linguistic) homogeneity as a human norm, and not as a contingent principle of the nationalist world view.' Thus, Anderson needs to explain why imagined communities need to be based – at least originally – on single print-languages and unified fields of communication rather than multilingual fields. While Anderson never explicitly addresses this question, the reasoning seems to run as follows: (1) most people can only speak one language; (2) people usually form strong emotional attachments to their language and fellow speakers of it; (3) a nation, therefore, should generally avoid having more than one language, since this would entail conflicted loyalties. Point 2 is, of course, taken from the chapter on patriotism (Chapter 8), and point 1 derives from the following statement:

In the sixteenth century the proportion of bilinguals within the total population of Europe was quite small; very likely no larger than the proportion in the world's population today, and – proletarian internationalism notwithstanding – in the centuries to come. Then and now the bulk of mankind is monoglot. (1991: 38)

Presumably this assumption is based on a later point about the length of time required to learn languages:

If every language is acquirable, its acquisition requires a real portion of a person's life; each new conquest is measured against shortening days. What limits one's access to other languages is not their imperviousness but one's own mortality. (1991: 148)

While it is undoubtedly true that all human languages cannot be learned in a single lifetime, the earlier statement about the tiny proportion of bilingual speakers is hard to understand, since many people around the world do, in fact, learn two, three, or more languages. From Beirut to Europe to the Andean and African countryside, multilingualism is often the norm, not the exception or something only achieved by highly educated persons. Summarizing the findings of post-1950s studies of language use in Asia, Africa, and Europe, Gumperz (1982: 20) writes, 'Bilingualism or bidialectalism tends to be the rule rather than the exception'. Once again, such factual errors can probably only be accounted for by Anderson's underlying assumptions: given the power and volatility of oral language's emotionality, Anderson assumes it is impossible for someone to learn multiple languages, with their strong emotional bonds, while still retaining allegiance to a single nation.

\* \* \*

Thus, the pattern has been set: orality is associated with emotion, particularism, and multilingualism, which are contrasted with print and seen as threats to national unification, with the exception of emotion harnessed to national attachments. This explains why orality is so rarely mentioned: orality is the negative space that completes the picture of print, the primary focus of the book. Granted, like any text, Anderson's argument simply focuses on certain topics and not others, yet there are times when oral language

is so crucially relevant that its exclusion can only seem like wholesale aversion, based on a disinclination to contaminate the cognitivist depictions of print and nations with messy, multilingual orality.

For example, Anderson's portrayal of silent, individualistic print consumption is highly selective and, in many ways, erroneous. As Anderson tells it, people since the 15th century almost never talked about print: rather, they consumed it individually, privately, and silently. Print simply acted directly upon people's consciousness until they finally recognized their national solidarity, knowing of each other's mutual existence in empty, homogeneous time. Anderson paints a ghostly picture of silent, atomistically isolated readers who come to recognize national bonds through purely visual experiences, i.e. imagining ('image-ing') the nation by perceiving juxtaposed images on a single newspaper page or within the flaps of a book: 'It [newspaper reading] is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others . . .' (1991: 35). Even the equally crucial 'unified fields of communication', which would seem logically to include spoken language, only consist of silent readers: 'These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed . . . the embryo of the nationally imagined community' (1991: 44).

To the contrary, we know that, even as late as the 19th century, writing was often read out loud and/or discussed in social situations involving groups of people (Clanchy, 1979; Finnegan, 1988; Keller-Cohen, 1993; Warner, 1990). In the American colonies, for example, reading and writing were, in actual practice and cultural self-representation, based on oral discourse, as Keller-Cohen (1993: 292) notes:

It was commonplace for reading to take place orally, so that the line between reading and speaking was blurred. Indeed, even in self-instruction books of the time, advice about reading consisted of principles to be followed when reading aloud. 'For reading is nothing but speaking what one sees in a book, as if he were expressing his own sentiments, as they rise to mind' (Burgh, 1775: 10) . . . The spoken word was central, then, in shaping the way colonial Americans understood and used reading and writing.<sup>2</sup>

As oral dialogue, colonial literacy was therefore inherently social, not the province of isolated individuals:

In colonial America, then, literacy was practiced with others – family, friends, neighbors, and in some cases school-based personnel; when these were not available, paper companions ['companion' was the common name for literacy self-instruction manuals, again reflecting literacy's social nature] were called to duty. In these ways, literacy was embedded in a social matrix. (Keller-Cohen, 1993: 292)

For that matter, even in the contemporary United States, where the habit of out-loud reading has largely been lost (but see Heath, 1983 for notable exceptions), print products are still situated within personal networks of individuals who continually discuss print products.

IC's overall exclusion of orality is even more conspicuous when contrasted with Jürgen

Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991). The striking similarities between Habermas' 'bourgeois public sphere' and Anderson's 'imagined communities' end when it comes to verbal discourse: with Anderson's solitary, silent readers, we are far from the clamor of Habermas' coffee houses, *salons*, and pubs, where heated face-to-face discussions took place, supplying the social network and critical attitude of the emerging bourgeois public sphere. Like Anderson, Habermas finds that a new consciousness and large-scale social identification emerge on the basis of print, but the difference is that, in Habermas' account, print is still nestled within oral contexts.

It is also telling that electronic media are never mentioned by Anderson in the entire book outside of the slight passage cited earlier, despite the many possible comparisons with print that cry out for analysis. Has the nightly television news replaced print in clocking empty time? Could anything suggest simultaneity across empty time more than the 'flashbacks' broadcast on television and radio during presidential inaugural ceremonies? Are not television soap operas the modern counterpart to novels that create a sense of characters living in simultaneous time? Given Anderson's concerns, these types of questions seem to deserve at least a few pages of consideration (beyond the two sentences on p. 135), though obviously only in discussions of the 20th century, when electronic media became widespread. Electronic and print media are strikingly similar in Anderson's terms, and these electronic broadcasts obviously have much greater distribution than print did even in its heyday, but, again, apparently Anderson's assumptions about orality and print prevent him from mixing these two domains: for Anderson, orality is, at heart, connected with multilingualism, emotion, and particularistic localism, so electronic media cannot be compared to print in chapters focused on the imagining and unification of the nation. Here, my argument dovetails specifically with Silverstein's forthcoming critique of IC (in press), which, among other points, argues that IC recapitulates the western ideology of language standardization, i.e. an illusion of national community based on a certain linguistic standard, the hegemonic standard promoted in print products like dictionaries and grammar manuals. Just as these language standards claim neutrality, 'a view from nowhere' removed from dialects and other impurities, Anderson has created a similar picture of the nation and standardized print. Echoing these points, I would add that Anderson's 'view from nowhere' specifically excludes orality, for the reasons already cited in this article.

Finally, we can briefly note the problems in Anderson's claim that, as one of its major contributions to imagined communities, 'print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation' (1991: 44). Thus, there is an association here between print as permanence or memory (image of antiquity), as opposed to the transience of oral speech. Here, too, though, we can note problems – in terms of missing elements, as well as internal consistency – with this argument. The problem here is the unwarranted reliance on a supposedly objective, measurable type of language fixity or permanence, without any regard for the way such fixity is actually dependent on subjective evaluations, i.e. linguistic ideologies. For example, Jack Goody, armed with a tape recorder and written transcriptions, discovered that performances of a creation myth in an African society actually varied considerably from one telling to the next; yet, when asked, Goody's informants sincerely told him that the myths were repeated verbatim, year after year (1987: Chapter 3). It is not that these informants were deliberately trying to mislead

Goody; it is just that, not sharing Goody's literate technologies nor his notion of language fixity, these people honestly believed that the myths were precisely repeated each year. Anyone who has worked with a semi-literate group will probably have had a similar experience; if you ask someone 'Is this the language your ancestors spoke?', the answer is likely to be 'yes', rather than an exposition on the history of language drift (unless, of course, the community is in the throes of language death). In fact, Anderson himself makes a somewhat similar point much later in the chapter on patriotism, where he says: 'No one can give the date for the birth of any language. Each looms up imperceptibly out of a horizonless past' (1991: 144). If this same point were applied to the earlier statement about language fixity, and, moreover, if Anderson had factored in people's subjective estimations of language permanence (language ideologies), it would be clear that, in themselves, print's undisputed advantages in preserving language had no consequences for the image of national antiquity. That is, images of language fixity depend on particular national linguistic ideologies (see Herzfeld, 1982), not objective language differences or technologies per se.

In sum, Anderson's account is based on a systematic opposition between print and orality, which can be represented in the following series of binary oppositions:

<b>Print</b>	<b>Orality</b>
Cognitive	Emotional
(Imagine the nation)	(Love the nation)
Universal	Particularistic
Monolingual	Multilingual
Permanent	Transient

By now, these terms may strike the reader as familiar, since they represent common western assumptions about language.

### WESTERN LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES

Returning to this article's central question, I want to suggest that the popularity of IC is partly due to its resonance with long-standing, deep-seated western views of language. In particular, in both cases we find an equation between literacy, cognition, the nation, and western identity itself, as opposed to orality's association with emotion, particularism, and non-western society; in addition, there is a view of written language as permanent, as opposed to transient orality. The overlap between these views and Anderson's account – to be more fully detailed later – is so extensive that it should be seen as at least partly fueling IC's success. The point is that these language associations predispose western readers to accept Anderson's argument that the nation was originally formed through print reading, and that print had to overcome orality in this process. Anderson's argument that print reading allows/causes people to think differently – to change their conception of time, to visualize a different community – is not received innocently or without preconfiguration: westerners – including western intellectuals, with their blind spots for writing – have long been accustomed to seeing literacy as something different from orality, a technology that creates higher mental states and national unification. Part of the appeal of IC, then, lies in its picture of print's triumph over volatile emotionality.

To spell out this western ideology of language, let me begin by noting that westerners have long used literacy as a central symbol of their own identity, as numerous studies have shown (see, for example, Brotherston, 1979, 1981; Clifford, 1986, 1988; De Certeau, 1988; Derrida, 1976; Graff, 1987; Harbsmeier, 1985, 1989; Herzfeld, 1987: Chapter 2; Mignolo, 1995; Quigley, 1997; Rappaport, 1990; Seed, 1991; Street, 1993). Space does not allow exploration of this complex, deep literacy-orality symbolism, but I will simply try to note some of the major points of overlap with Anderson's account, and occasionally illustrate these points with concrete examples.

At the most general level, it is fair to say that literacy symbolism has been at the heart of modern western identity, particularly due to its association with the following areas:

- (1) Judaeo-Christianity ('religions of the book', sacred texts, as opposed to tribal, 'oral' religions),
- (2) science (literate data collection and publications, modern education, as opposed to emotional or irrational thought),
- (3) historical consciousness (written documents, as opposed to oral myth; 'history' as opposed to 'anthropology'),
- (4) the nation-state (modern record-keeping, 'rationalized bureaucracy', in Weber's terms, as opposed to other government forms),
- (5) 'civilization' (as a moral notion, as opposed to 'illiterate' Others).

Given the importance of all these areas, it would simply be hard to underestimate the breadth and power of literacy symbolism in western culture. Moreover, this literacy symbolism prepares us for a text like IC, where we find similar contrasts between literacy and orality. In particular, we find similar associations between literacy and cognition (science and education; print, imagining the nation), which in turn affect the views of monolingualism/multilingualism. Also, westerners have been long ingrained in the notion that only writing preserves memory, as opposed to the transience of speech; and, finally, that nations require a single language.

Historically, such literacy symbolism took hold in the period of early modern exploration and conquest, as Harbsmeier (1985: 72) indicates: 'But only early modern European civilisation came to make its own ability properly to describe and understand the other, its own proper literacy, into the very definition of its own identity as against the rest of the world'. Obviously western language ideologies have gone through various changes since the early modern period, yet the legacy of the same beliefs is still with us today. For example, due to the rise of universal mass education, literacy is now even *more* closely associated with cognition and abstract thought than ever before. Today it is virtually impossible for westerners to conceive of knowledge that does not rely on writing; hence, whereas the term 'literacy' did not even exist in colonial American vocabulary, today any knowledge whatsoever can be referred to with the idiom of literacy, as in 'culinary literacy', 'car literacy', 'cultural literacy', and so on. A good example of this usage is the *New York Times* restaurant review that flatly informs readers, 'Knowledge of salt and pepper, after all, is the basis of culinary literacy.'<sup>3</sup> Keller-Cohen (1993: 295) explains this (over-) use of the term 'literacy' as follows: 'For even where knowledge/skills are not necessarily acquired through the written word, as in the case of sex or automobiles, the term *literacy* is applied. The image of learning through print is

evoked to characterize what is acquired, as though the prototypical case of learning was literacy'. An equally revealing case of this literacy-knowledge equation is found in Clifford's discussion of the Mashpee Indian trial, where jurors' decisions were constrained by western assumptions about the greater validity of documentary knowledge, as opposed to verbal testimony (1988: Chapter 12, especially pp. 282, 317, 328–9, 331, 339–41). The cultural specificity of this view is even more striking when we contrast the present view of 'an illiterate' – a deeply shameful social category in the USA (Collins, 1995: 83) – with Socrates' belief that true knowledge must be discovered through verbal dialogue, *not* written text, which, he complained, stupidly gives the same answer over and over (see Gee, 1988). This view of literacy – as cognitively distinct from orality – certainly resonates with Anderson's terms.

Furthermore, school-literacy is now deeply associated with the nation, for the simple reason that mass education has become a major instrument for socializing the country's youngest generations, not only in patriotism in the strict sense, but in a full range of skills and values that everyone believes will affect the future economic, social, and moral direction of the nation.<sup>4</sup> And for people who constantly rely on literate mnemonics (for everything from the Bible to post-its and shopping lists), it is certainly all-too-easy to embrace Anderson's point that print's language fixity supported imagined communities.

Examples like this could be multiplied endlessly,<sup>5</sup> but these should suffice to indicate that literacy evokes deep associations for contemporary westerners, which is likely to affect their reading of a text like IC. In short, western readers are predisposed to embrace an account that opposes print and orality and ultimately attributes the major aspects of national identity to print.

Although it may be hard to believe, at first glance, that academic readers would be so misled by unconscious assumptions about print and orality, this is actually easy enough to understand, since academics generally retain certain common-sense, popular beliefs about language and culture and they obviously have a deep investment in writing and print. It is not hard to imagine that many could develop a blind spot for triumphalist stories of print (or orality, simply switching the plus and minus signs of this binary opposition), and, in fact, this would not be the first time that this sort of misreading has occurred. Most famously, similar oversights were made by 'Great Divide' theories, which connected literacy to abstract, logical thought, historical consciousness, innovation, and language awareness, while oral modes of thought were portrayed as inherently concrete, context-bound, formulaic, and conservative. Collins (1995: 77) summarizes this research as follows: 'In the oral column go characteristics such as memory-based, empathetic and participatory, situational, and aggregative; in the literate column go the counterparts, such as record-based, objectively distanced, abstract, and analytic'. Yet while these literacy theories have been repeatedly and systematically disproved (Collins, 1995: 80), they seem to have an appeal that is resistant to criticism. As Collins (1995: 78) puts it: 'Some of Goody's, Ong's, and Olson's claims are intriguing, and they have an initial plausibility. Try teaching these claims to undergraduates and you will discover how deeply a literate bias is part of our academic common sense.' Other such cases – of theories about literacy that persist in Hydra-like fashion, despite strong criticism – include Todorov (1984) on Cortés' literate mentality, Hirsch (1987) on cultural-educational standardization, early accounts of awe at western literacy (see Wogan, 1994), and the self-renewing, McLuhanesque theories about social changes and the mass media,

especially, most recently, the Internet. This is not to say that IC is nothing more than a recapitulation of Goody, Ong, or anyone else, but the point is to show how, even in the recent past, academic communities have been overly quick to embrace theories about print and literacy – many with similar distinctions in terms of memory, cognition and so on – that turned out to have serious shortcomings, and to suggest that caution is therefore advised in this case, as well.

In making this argument about the influence of western notions of language, I am drawing on the concept of 'language ideologies', originally defined by Silverstein (1979: 193) as 'any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use'. Although such native ideas about language have often been dismissed in the past as 'secondary rationalizations', linguistic ideology has recently received increasing scholarly attention due to recognition of its importance as a mediating link between social structure and linguistic behavior (see especially Gal and Irvine, 1995, in press; Irvine, 1989, 1992; Kroskrity et al., 1992; Silverstein, 1979, in press; Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994); accordingly, ideas about print, orality, and the nation are also usefully interpreted in terms of linguistic ideology. In particular, IC falls into the path laid out by some of society's most deep-seated, taken-for-granted ideas about literacy, which enjoy hegemonic authority inasmuch as they enforce 'metasemiotic regimentation', as Parmentier puts it (1993: 360), i.e. the semiotic process of stipulating, controlling, or defining the contextual, indexical, or pragmatic dimension of sign function in 'discursive texts' by means of the construction of a relatively fixed or coherent 'interactional text'. That is, certain overarching, metasemiotic signs have immense power in that they determine ('regiment') the way other cultural signs will be produced and interpreted. In the case at hand, western ideas about literacy and orality underlie notions about identities, affectivity, and nationhood, among other things.

## CONCLUSION

Anderson's account is therefore based on popular linguistic ideologies: the dichotomy between print and orality, the assumption that nations must be monolingual, and the assumption that language fixity requires written mnemonics. The point, then, is that these ideologies lend a plausibility to the book that presumably accounts for much of its appeal. While it may be impossible to prove the influence of these ideologies, the case stands or falls – as with most arguments about cultural symbolism and ideology – on, among other things, logical consistency, the fit between the interpretation and the text, plausibility, economy of explanation, number of cases explained, and absence of alternative explanations. For example, the factual or interpretive oversights noted – assumptions that broadcasting is multilingual, that reading was silent, that most people are monolingual, and that print in itself added an image of antiquity – are consistent with the overall pattern outlined and give it further plausibility. Assuming that my argument passes the test on at least some of these accounts, it should give readers reason to pause and re-evaluate their own reading of IC, especially when my argument is read in conjunction with previous criticisms of IC.

The lesson to be drawn from this critique, however, is not just that we need to avoid recapitulation of linguistic ideologies in theories about nationalism, but that precisely such ideas should be an *object* in our studies of nationalism. That is, if many people

believe that some specific language form like standard print is integral to nationalism, then precisely these beliefs should be accounted for. We should ask about the origins of these linguistic ideologies, how they relate to other popular conceptions of language, and, above all, how such ostensibly innocuous, taken-for-granted ideas about language may support nationalist hegemonic projects. Whatever the specific focus, the exploration of linguistic ideologies should open up new directions for the study of nationalism.

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### Notes

- 1 In response to Anderson's question, let me simply cite the Ecuadorian national hymn, which is replete with violent imagery, as well as the Marseillaise's references to spilling alien blood and the (former) Maryland state song's verse about evil Yankee oppressors. Here is an English translation (my own) of the 'National Hymn of Ecuador':

Your children, offended by the yoke  
that was imposed by Spanish aggressors,  
of the unjust and horrendous disgrace  
that weighed heavily upon you,  
your sacred voice was raised to the sky,  
noble voice of allegiance without equal,  
to break that oppressive yoke  
Oh save the Nation a thousand times! Oh Nation,  
glory to you! Your bosom, your bosom overflows  
with joy and peace, and your radiant front  
whose beautiful shine we contemplate more than the sun (refrain).  
The first children of the land  
who proudly Pichincha decorates  
[the site of a major independence battle against the Spanish]  
they proudly honored you forever señora  
and shed their blood for you.  
God watched and accepted the holocaust,  
and that blood was fertile seed  
for other heroes who astonished the world  
as you watched thousands more arise.

Ultimately, however, this issue does not impinge on the oral-print dichotomy discerned in IC, since, whether hymns inspire love or hate, the orality = emotion equation is maintained.

- 2 Similarly, see Warner (1990: 21), who analyzes colonial New Englanders' conceptions of language in these terms:

New Englanders, far from being ignorant of letters, used them with an intensity equalled by very few other cultures in the world at the time. Yet in an important

ideological way it was an oral society. New Englanders accorded a disciplinary privilege to speech and in most contexts insisted on seeing writing as a form of speaking.

- 3 Molly O'Neill, *New York Times Magazine*, 12 January 1997, p. 41.
- 4 Focusing on such symbolism should not be interpreted as a slighting of literacy education: though the latter is more often discussed, the two views are not incompatible. I agree with Pattison's view (1982: Chapter 7) that, though literacy is not the noble, critical practice that many envision, the modern state and economy require certain basic levels of literacy skills.
- 5 For example, how many films use paper, pencil, or other literacy props to convey messages about identity and so on? In *The Godfather*, for example, Al Pacino makes a classic sword-pen contrast when he tells the story of the bandleader, capped off with this now-famous ending: 'My father made him an offer he couldn't refuse. [Kate: What was that?] Luca Brazi held a gun to his head, and my father assured him that either his brains or his signature would be on the contract'. In a later scene, this gun-pen opposition is transformed when Pacino proposes to carry out major killings and then have it written up in the newspapers, representing the second-generation, immigrant Others' combination of Old and New Worlds, national literacy, and traditional violence. Is it a coincidence that most viewers are not consciously aware of this literacy symbolism and yet the filmmakers consistently use such literacy props and references throughout the film?

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