

Voicing Politics: Linguistics and the Debility of Political Science

Richard D. Anderson, Jr.

University of California, Los Angeles¹

Abstract: *Voicing Politics* claims that political attitudes vary with the language that people speak. Experiments with random assignment of bilinguals to answer survey questionnaires presented in either Estonian or Russian show that their answers do change when the language of the questionnaire is switched. First, relative to gendered Russian, genderless Estonian elicits more support for women's rights. Second, relative to futured Russian, futureless Estonian elicits more willingness to invest now for future gain. Third, relative to dominant Estonian, minority Russian elicits more awareness of the "most nationalist" party in Estonian politics. But the first claim is inconsistent with the authors' own evidence. The second claim is inconsistent with both Estonian and Russian's joint use of linguistic aspect to express futurity. The third claim is invalidated by Russian's lack of any translation for English "nationalist" that does not signal "anti-Russian," to which Russian speakers will be more sensitive regardless of dominant or minority status. The experimental asymmetries reported by the authors are attributable, not to differences between the Estonian and Russian languages, but to unspoken context, on which the use of any language for communication must rely but which varies from one language to the next and for which survey research cannot control. Since no practicable survey questionnaire can control what context respondents choose to activate in interpreting a question and deciding how to respond, rather than identifying "beliefs" or "attitudes," any survey research reveals unspecifiable variation in context. Since much of what purports to be known about politics has been inferred from inherently unreliable surveys, this implication of the errors in *Voicing Politics* is debilitating enough. But since the institutions that political science attempts to explain are uniformly consequences of language use, the uncritical endorsement of *Voicing Politics* by the discipline's most prestigious American academic press, its board, editor and referees, prominent endorsers and multiple reviewers is evidence that the debility revealed by this study's errors afflicts a broad sweep of the discipline extending far beyond survey research alone.

Keywords: *Voicing Politics*, survey questionnaires, Estonian and Russian languages, survey language context, political linguistics

"The languages people speak can affect what they think and how they think about the political world around them" (Pérez and Tavits 2022, 130). To substantiate this proposition, *Voicing Politics* advances three hypotheses. First, genderless languages induce their speakers to express more support for women's political opportunities than do speakers of gendered languages. Second, "futureless" languages induce their speakers to express more support for paying costs today to secure gains tomorrow than do speakers of futured languages. Third, in every state, some language is "dominant" because used for politics; it may also be the language spoken by the majority of the state's population. The authors categorize any languages not used for politics

1 Corresponding author: Richard D. Anderson, Jr. Professor Emeritus of Political Science. E-mail address: prof.richard.anderson@gmail.com

but spoken by inhabitants of the state as minority languages, even if spoken by the majority. A minority language induces its speakers to express more sensitivity to issues concerning relations between dominant and minority populations and to be quicker to recall political organizations advocating the supremacy of the dominant language and its speakers, while a dominant language induces its speakers to recall more information about politics in general.

The empirical test of each hypothesis is ingenious. The investigators isolate the effect of language by randomly assigning bilinguals to respond to a survey questionnaire presented in either of two languages. One author's background in Estonia motivates a search there for bilinguals proficient in both Estonian and Russian. Estonian is genderless, "futureless" by the authors' definition, and dominant in the sense of now being used for politics as well as being the first language of most Estonian citizens. Conversely, Russian is gendered and, by their definition, futured, and it is also the first language of a minority of Estonian citizens, although before independence Russian was used for politics. The investigators also examine the question of information recall by randomly assigning Americans bilingual in Spanish and English to recall information about politics in the United States. Finally, all their findings from random assignment of bilinguals are also tested for external validity. Their test begins by categorizing languages used in the World Values Survey as genderless or gendered, "futureless" or futured, and dominant or minority. The categorization predicts responses about women's rights, about investing now for future gains, and about favorability toward minority rights.

Here I examine whether the investigators' case is as watertight as they think. It is not. But my goal in examining the case is not to discredit their effort. *Voicing Politics* makes two substantial contributions. First, it demonstrates beyond question that switching between languages used in survey questionnaires can alter responses. It goes astray when it attributes variation in responses to grammatical features of a language, such as genderlessness or "futurelessness." That attribution is provably invalid. Second, it pioneers the introduction into survey research of the discipline of linguistics. Survey researchers reliant on language to pose their questions and to formulate the answers have rarely if ever consulted the theoretical or empirical literature in linguistics about how languages work. *Voicing Politics* begins to introduce some of that literature. Its authors' case is leaky not because they venture into linguistics but because they do not venture nearly far enough.

What linguistics teaches about variation in languages concerns not merely and not mainly grammar. Grammar does vary, but where it varies, some other feature of the language compensates for the variation. In this sense, there is the universal grammar that Noam Chomsky and his adherents have labored to define. Part of the compensatory mechanism universally used by languages, when their grammar does not specify everything that might be overt in the grammar of some other languages, is context. No language fully specifies all the information needed to formulate or to interpret the meaning of any utterance or text, but every language relegates some of that information to unstated context presupposed to be shared among speaker and audience, author and readership, or signer and viewership. What is relegated to unspoken context varies across languages. Not grammar, but neglect of differences in the context missing from questionnaires presented to and answered by bilinguals randomly assigned to use Estonian or Russian, accounts for the differences in their responses. No survey questionnaire can control for variation in the context that the respondent must generate to choose an answer. This incapacity is the debilitating quandary that the study of linguistics reveals for survey researchers and not only for them but for political scientists in general.