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Nation

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Languages and Nations

The term "nation," as opposed to "state" or "federation" or "territory" or other related terms, implies the existence of a people united either by common ancestry or some other deep cultural bond. Although the different natures of the bonds mean that nations themselves are never identical in makeup—indeed, in everyday discourse "nation" can be interchangeable with "state"—they are spoken of and imagined as if all still fit the historical concept of nation that underpinned their formation from the early modern period onward.

The concept of the nation, and the particular features that mark one nation off from another, have always led back to language as the most fundamental of all cultural differences. The analysis and teaching of languages has inevitably been bound up with projects to create and spread belief in some version of a nation—though 20th-century modernism, a movement defined by its "deliberate break with classical and traditional forms or methods" (*OED*), allowed linguists and language practitioners to go temporarily into denial about the fact.

National language policies have proven effective in proportion as they take account of the beliefs, desires, and aspirations of the people affected (see Wright, 2004; Joseph, 2006). In determining where the boundaries of a nation lie in terms of both population and territory, and whether a given individual belongs to a particular nation or not, the matter of what language is spoken has long seemed to offer the surest and most objective criterion. Yet no nation has ever been linguistically homogeneous—bilingualism and multilingualism have always been the norm for most societies—and the way in which languages spread is a cultural matter disconnected from genetic ethnicity.

There is, then, a gap between the reliance on language to define the nation, and the heterogeneous nature of language itself. The gap is filled by ideology and myth, and it is here above all that is located the importance of language (or rather, of what people believe about language) for nationalism. Renaissance Europe knew this both through its religious and its philosophical heritage. The Bible taught in Genesis 10:5 that, after the Flood, the grandsons of Noah spread across the earth, each forming his own nation, with its own language. The ancient pedigree for empiricism in the early modern period led back to Epicurus, who believed that different languages reflected the different physical makeup of the nations who spoke them.

Revolutions and imperial expansion over what historians call the "long 19th century" (the 1780s through World War I) brought about a second phase in the conceptualization of nations, with language taking even more of a central role in order to legitimize the creation of states which combined a number of nations in the traditional sense, often nations which had long been hostile to one another. Particularly in German lands that were being taken over by Napoleon, writers such as Fichte, drawing on earlier work by Herder, strove to locate resistance in the belief that people who share a language share a national spirit or soul, and have a natural right to occupy a state with boundaries corresponding to that of their linguistic nation.

This ideology, which in recent years has been referred to as "language nationalism," would still be the guiding principle when the map of Europe was redrawn at the end of World War I. It would reach its culmination in Nazi Germany, with its project to restore the Aryan nation to primal purity by eliminating foreign elements such as Jews, whose racial difference was established principally on linguistic grounds, according to the research of Hutton (1999).

Language nationalism is a double-edged sword. It gives meaning to people's lives by marking and manifesting their identity and allowing them to bond with those who share that identity. But it does so at the price of making it impossible to ignore differences vis-à-vis other groups, thus helping to keep opposition and hostility alive. The "one nation, one language" doctrine, Romantic and oversimplified as it was, allowed many oppressed peoples to gain their independence in 1919, in some cases after centuries of foreign domination. Yet it was linked to the doctrines that fed into "scientific racism" and were ultimately used to justify genocide.

Language, Knowledge, Religion, and Nation

In Europe, for over 1,000 years, "language" referred in the West almost exclusively to Latin, and in the East to Greek. The vernaculars which ordinary people used with one another in everyday discourse were recognized to exist, but not to have the status of "a language." The fact that they differed from village to village made them appear unsuited to functions involving the transmission (through space or time) of real, permanent *knowledge*. Even after this way of seeing things began to change in the late medieval period, the basic one-language model remained in place: one dialect came to be a standardized form of the national vernacular. This process took a long time to transpire—indeed it is still transpiring—and may never reach completion, as certain symbolic functions in law, religion, and education continue to be reserved for the classical languages.

Initially, the main obstacle to seeing vernacular ways of speaking as languages was that Latin and Greek had "grammar," as witnessed by treatises on the subject, and the variation in them was controlled by the fact that they were "dead," since even Greek did not have native speakers of its classical form. This fulfilled (or perhaps determined) the expectations of what a language had to be, given the exigencies of maintaining and transmitting knowledge as noted above. When a person's enlightenment was revealed by one's control of the Latin terminology for the highest philosophical concepts, it was difficult to imagine such knowledge being held and safely transmitted in a vernacular that was itself "irregular" in two senses, exhibiting great variation from locale to locale (and even in the usage of a single individual), and lacking the formalized rules of a grammar book.

This is why, when Dante set out to imagine (or in his word, "discover") an "Italian language" at the start of the 14th century, the term he used for it was *volgare illustre*—*volgare* because it belonged to the ordinary people as well as to the learned, *illustre* because it could be the vehicle of enlightenment, of the highest knowledge. This, he realized, would take some work. *De vulgari eloquentia* laid out the work plan, and the *Divina commedia* then performed the result. Italian became the model that was followed in the creation of other "illuminated vernaculars." Once Dante had demonstrated that a vernacular could be not only a language, but a language of enlightenment, and could form the basis of a specifically *national* literary culture (even where the political nation did not exist, as, again, Italy would not for centuries to come), a new era opened in the politics of language in Europe. The first effect was simply that writing in the vernacular became semi-respectable, and more people—though still a small minority—began doing it. With movable type and print capitalism in the 16th century, it emerged that the potential market for books in the

vernacular was more sizeable (though less prestigious) than for books in Latin. Profitability accelerated if large print runs were sold, which could happen only if a large audience could read the language.

This brought a new twist to the old language–power–resources nexus. While scholars and clergymen concerned themselves with enlightenment in the language, which the borrowing of words from Latin and Greek gave the impression of increasing, publishers knew that a certain economy between learned and popular language was necessary if the readership was to be wide enough to make a book profitable. Without profits, funds could not be raised to publish any more books, since those with the funds would invest them elsewhere. But something else was happening in the 16th century: the "emergence" of the concept of the nation. I put the word emergence in quotation marks because it suggests a nondeliberate process, but in fact it is clear from the documentary record that vast efforts were undertaken by governments to get the populace to buy into the idea of the nation. The "national language" was an obvious concept to seize upon to promote belief in the internal unity of the nation and its difference from its neighbors and rivals—at the most fundamental level, that of knowledge itself. Even if these ideas were not clearly articulated until the early 19th century (see for example Joseph, 2004, pp. 109–15 on Fichte), they are implicit in much of the writing and cultural activity surrounding language from Dante through to the end of the 18th century—and nowhere more so than in those mostly northern European countries which took the nationalist route of breaking from Rome to form their own national church.

Myhill (2006, p. 13) has put forward the thesis that "If a pre-modern national church had been established (in practice all such churches to be discussed here were established by 1600), then even in modern times national identity based upon religious affiliation has proven to be more important than identity based upon spoken language." This is either because "the group was secure in terms of its political and military sovereignty but wanted to emphasize its religious sovereignty as well," or because "the group was in a tenuous position, politically and militarily, in terms of maintaining its independence or autonomy, and wished to emphasize its distinctiveness by making its separateness organizationally explicit." This thesis holds potential for future research, though at this stage Myhill's presentation of facts may be too selective, and an account which allows the same result either because a group is secure or because it is weak is explanatorily unsatisfying.

Writing the Nation

The beginnings of modern political nationalism in early modern Europe faced a fundamental problem: on the ground, nothing corresponded to the "national languages" that nations ought to possess, according to the Bible and the Epicureans. The spoken vernaculars were a patchwork of local dialects so diverse that one did not have to travel more than a day or two from home before ceasing to understand or be understood, particularly if a mountain or major river had to be crossed. The business of church and state, and anything that required a written record, was with few exceptions done in Latin, which, being pan-European, did not qualify as anyone's national language. And yet, all that "language" proper was taken to mean was defined by Latin, with its grammars, its rhetorical tradition, its literary heritage, and its status as the official scriptural language of Western Christianity.

Linguistically equipping nascent nations required creating for their vernacular speech all those cultural embodiments that Latin possessed. The first obstacle was the formal diversity. Latin itself was pronounced differently in different parts of Europe, yet by cultivating a high literary and rhetorical style, modeled on classical authors, its written form

was kept aloof and its diversity limited. For this to be achieved with a national language, a primarily written form would need to be fixed, and there was no lack of educated men eager to put the dialect of their own region forward as the basis of that written language. It would, after all, mean that the nation would look to their region as its spiritual center, and to them personally as its cultural authorities.

The ideology of language nationalism holds not only that a people and its language are coterminous, but that the language embodies the soul of the people, whose cultural responsibility it is to keep the language pure, probe its history, and ensure that its "correct" form is spread throughout the population as much as possible. In fact a little historical evidence could be stretched a long way; Smith (1998) has emphasized how much of the effort of nationalism construction is aimed at reaching back to the past in the interest of "ethno-symbolism." As Hobsbawm has pointed out, the national standard language is, like the nation itself, a discursive construction:

> National languages . . . are the opposite of what nationalist mythology supposes them to be, namely the primordial foundations of national culture and the matrices of the national mind. They are usually attempts to devise a standardized idiom out of a multiplicity of actually spoken idioms, which are downgraded to dialects . . . (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 51)

Hobsbawm defines the standard language as "a sort of platonic idea of the language, existing behind and above all its variants and imperfect versions" (p. 57). A "mystical identification of nationality" then occurs with this idea of the language, an identification Hobsbawm considers "much more characteristic of the ideological construction of nationalist intellectuals, of whom Herder is the prophet, than of the actual grassroots users of the idiom. It is a literary and not an existential concept" (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 57). It should be noted, however, that while it may be *historically* true that the national/standard language is the property of nationalist intellectuals rather than of ordinary users during the period when it is initially being constructed, this ceases to be the case once it enters the educational sphere, and once education is widespread. The linguistic ideology then becomes common national property, as least as likely to find firm belief among the working classes who do not control it as among the upper classes who do.

Nations and Languages as Imagined Communities

The nation as reconceived since this period has been defined by Benedict Anderson as an "imagined political community."

> It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion . . . Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist. (Anderson, 1991, p. 6)

As with the "discovery" of a national language, a crucial part of this inventing or imagining of a nation is the creation of a belief that the nation has *not* been invented. Its invention must, in other words, be forgotten. For if invented, the nation might be perceived as merely artificial, arbitrary, contingent in character, thus making its validity seem very shallow indeed. Instead the myth must be made that the nation is a *natural* entity, with a deep-rooted authenticity that is being rediscovered. If the nation in question has not existed as a nation during the whole of recorded history, then its legitimizing myth will be extended back into prehistory as far as needed to establish its claim to authenticity. Anderson goes on to explain that the nation

is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comrade-ship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (p. 7)

Both of the primary organizational structures which preceded the modern conception of the nation, the religious community and the dynastic realm, were vertical rather than "horizontal" in arrangement. Authority flowed downward from God to the supreme human authority, whether religious or secular, and thence outward to the rest of the community. A hallmark of modern thought was that these vertical hierarchies came to be seen as overtly mythical, serving the interests of those at the top and oppressing those at the bottom. And so they came to be replaced, in part, by the "horizontal" nation of which every citizen is, in a sense, an equal member. The fact of their inhabiting a contiguous territory becomes essential, overriding differences of religion, culture, class, and so on. Yet how then to motivate people to fight, to the death if necessary, on behalf of the nation—often against other members of their own religion, for example? This is why the new mythologies were required.

It has not been unusual for linguistic difference to be increased, particularly through writing, in order to create two distinctive national languages where, from the modern linguist's point of view, there is actually one single language, though the speech commu-nities involved insist that they differ. A classic case is that of Serbian and Croatian, which are mutually comprehensible, differing on a level comparable with dialects of English. But they have undergone literary development in a way designed to maximize the appearance of difference between them. Serbian, the language of a majority Orthodox Christian nation, is written in the Cyrillic alphabet, as Russian is. Croatian, the language of a majority Roman Catholic nation, is written in the Latin alphabet, as English is. Linguists often prefer to speak of "Serbo-Croatian" as a single language, on the grounds of the lack of linguistic distance, but this is not a concept one often encounters among Serbians or Croatians, for whom the religious and attendant cultural differences have remained strong enough to provoke war and "ethnic cleansing" as recently as the 1990s.

An earlier example is that of Irish and Scots Gaelic, universally recognized as two distinct languages, with the Ethnologue database listing as well "Hiberno-Scottish Gaelic," iden-tifying it as an "Archaic literary language based on 12th century Irish, formerly used by professional classes in Ireland until the 17th century and Scotland until the 18th century." But people in the Gaelic-speaking areas of Scotland up until well into the 17th century recognized just one language, which they called Erse (Irish). Only around that time did the desire arise to have *their own* authentic Gaelic, and some of those who shared the desire brought it into existence by deliberately writing Gaelic in ways that broke with the norms of what today, in retrospect, is called "Hiberno-Scottish Gaelic." Ever since, the separate-ness of Irish and Scottish Gaelic has been more immediately apparent on the page than to the ear.

Literary development always extends distance and sometimes creates it, not just from other related dialects, but even from the dialect base of the very language that is undergo-ing the building-out process. In the end, though, so long as people *believe* that their way of speaking constitutes a language in its own right, there is a real sense in which it *is* a distinct language. They will probably find ways to "perform" their distinctive linguistic identity for the benefit of others, but ultimately what matters is the imagined community of their language and their nation.

In the second half of the 19th century, those Eastern European and Scandinavian nations that had lacked a well-defined standard language of their own acquired one—or two, in the case of Norway's *Nynorsk* and *Bokmål* (the first based more on rural and the second

more on literary dialects), and Greece's demotic and *katharevousa* (puristic). Meanwhile, the older European standard languages, formed during the Renaissance, were subjected to a new wave of nationalistically motivated attempts at eliminating variation by establishing a single "correct" usage, based on scientific study of the language's history. This was the age of the great modern dictionaries such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the French *Larousse*, and their counterparts in every other major language. These same years witnessed the rise of the "history of the language" as a genre, following the plot of national histories, where the modern standard language is treated as the perfect expression of the national soul and its rise as an inevitable historical good. Those who contributed to its rise are portrayed as heroes, while anyone who tried to hold it back, either by sticking conservatively to Latin or by promoting a rival dialect as the vernacular standard, is shown up as a knave or a fool.

However, this new wave of standardization also saw attempts to promote other regional dialects that had lost out in the initial race to emerge as the national tongue. The Félibrige movement in the south of France was a particularly successful example. A new, standardized form of Provençal was promoted through the production of grammars and creative literature, notably by the poet Frédéric Mistral. Many others followed this example, in the Celtic-speaking areas of the British Isles and France, the Basque and Catalan areas of France and Spain, and in other regions throughout Western Europe. This new linguistic separatism would continue to flourish through the 20th century, though states would differ in the extent to which they would tolerate regional vernaculars or try to restrict them to private contexts. This was also the period in which the revival of Hebrew was being discussed and planned by European Zionists—though by no means were all of them agreed that Hebrew should be the national language of the eventual Jewish homeland. Attempts at standardizing Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish, and Jewish dialects of Slavic and other Semitic languages were also underway.

Outside Europe, in the Americas, Oceania, and South Africa, the period saw growing recognition of national varieties of Dutch, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish, that could legitimately follow norms of their own independent of those of the European homeland. National language academies sprang up throughout South America in the last two decades of the 19th century. In most cases, what appear objectively to be very minor differences took on great significance as markers of national identity within the standard written language, which continued to be 99% identical with its European counterpart, even when, as in the case of Quebec French or Brazilian Portuguese, the spoken form of the language (except as used by the educated middle and upper classes) had become largely incomprehensible to people in France or Portugal.

In Asia, calls were heard for the traditional written languages, with their centuries or even millennia of venerable tradition, to be replaced with an alphabetic system, as modernizers looked generally to Western technological methods. These calls would meet with success in Indonesia and Malaysia, though not in all countries. For Chinese there was a particular obstacle to alphabetization. The system of characters transcended differences among the Chinese dialects, which are linguistically as distant from one another as are English, German, and Swedish. Alphabetization would have required the choice of one dialect as standard—a political and practical impossibility in China until the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

Modeling Language Nationalism

Various models have been put forward for understanding how language embodies national identity (see Joseph, 2004). During the decades of Marxist intellectual dominance, it was

inevitably seen as a manifestation of power. Starting in the 1970s, the social identity theory developed by Henri Tajfel moved away from such analysis, toward a quasi-structuralist identification of social identity as "that *part* of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). It focused on the relative hierarchizations that people seem instinctively to impose on ourselves, most particularly in our status as members of "in-groups" and "out-groups."

Tajfel's sometime collaborator Michael Billig went on to analyze the particular power of the half-unnoticed signs of identity that are spread and reinforced daily through the symbols on coins and flags and, indeed, in forms of language. He defines this "banal nationalism" as

> the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced. It is argued that these habits are not removed from everyday life, as some observers have supposed. Daily, the nation is indicated, or "flagged," in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition. (Billig, 1995, p. 6)

Billig criticizes studies of nationalism for focusing too much on the strongly asserted nationalism that is typical only of a small minority of people, ignoring the banal nationalism that is part of everyone's everyday life (strong nationalists included).

The idea is often encountered that in present-day "late modernity" we are experiencing serious challenges to the modern concept of nation, due to globalization, by which is meant the movement of people, capital, and ideas across national boundaries to an unprecedented degree. Serious historians of the subject maintain, however, that this is something of an illusion, brought on by the fact that the 20th century was a time of unusually high restrictions on trade and migration, and that what has happened over recent decades is a return to historically more normal conditions. The fact that nations have been able to reground themselves in new national languages after having given up their traditional one testifies not to the weakening of the nation as a concept, but rather to its resilience and robustness.

SEE ALSO: Cultural Identity; Language, Politics, and the Nation-State; Language Attitudes in Language Policy and Planning; Language Rights in Language Policy and Planning; Multilingualism and Language Rights; Role of Language and Place in Language Policy

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