

THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE AND THE CONCEPT OF LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Linguistic identity is largely a political matter and languages are flags of allegiance. This means that the instrumental view of language is fundamentally flawed. If anything, it is the pre-theoretical sense that communication is possible or desirable in given contexts or, more technically, the presence of a relatively stable speech community, that makes us postulate the existence of a common language. So too, it is the unwillingness to communicate or the unavailability of the means to do so that paves the way for the sense that there are insuperable linguistic barriers to contend with. The immediate upshot of this line of reasoning is that there are no such things as languages, if by 'languages' we mean natural objects that are "out there", waiting to be discovered, described, and catalogued by the linguist. What this means is that there is an urgent need to foreground the issue of the politics of language.

KEY WORDS

Linguistic identity, language *vs.* communication, language loyalty, language and nationalism, politics of language.

RESUMEN

La identidad lingüística es ampliamente una materia política, y las lenguas son banderas de uniones o alianzas. Esto significa que la visión instrumental del lenguaje es completamente fallida. De cualquier forma, es el sentido pre-teórico que ve la comunicación como posible o deseable en determinados contextos, o más técnicamente, la presencia de una comunidad de habla razonablemente estable, que nos hace postular la existencia de una lengua común. Así también, es la mala voluntad para comunicarse o la incapacidad de los medios para hacerlo que prepara el camino para asumir que hay barreras lingüísticas involucradas en eso. El resultado final de esa forma de razonamiento

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to es que no existen tales cosas llamadas lenguas, si por 'lenguas' entendemos los objetos naturales "disponibles", que están ahí, esperando ser descubiertos, descritos, y catalogados por los lingüistas. Lo que esto significa, al final, es que hay una necesidad urgente de priorizar los resultados de las políticas del lenguaje.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Identidad lingüística, lenguaje *vs.* comunicación, lealtad lingüística-lengua y nacionalismo, políticas del lenguaje.

RÉSUMÉ

L'identité linguistique est largement une question politique et les langues sont des drapeaux d'allégeance. Cela veut dire que la vision instrumentale du langage est fondamentalement problématique. En fait, c'est le sens pré-théorique rendant possible ou souhaitable la communication dans des contextes donnés ou, plus techniquement parlant, la présence d'une communauté linguistique relativement stable, qui nous fait postuler l'existence d'une langue commune. De même, c'est la réticence à communiquer ou la non-disponibilité des moyens pour ce faire qui ouvre la voie dans le sens qu'il n'y a pas de barrières linguistiques unsurmontable à affronter. Le résultat immédiat de cette ligne de raisonnement, c'est que les langues n'existent pas, si par langues nous comprenons des objets naturels qui sont 'au-dehors', en attendant pour être découverts, décrits et catalogués par le linguiste. Cela veut dire qu'il y a un besoin urgent de mettre en relief la question de la politique du langage.

MOTS-CLÉ

Identité linguistique, langue *vs.* communication, loyauté linguistique, langue et nationalisme, politique du langage.

That languages and language loyalties are frequently exploited by the powers that be to further political ends is a fact that nobody who has an inkling of familiarity with world history will call into question. One does not need to go into the annals ancient history to discover that social networks and communal bonds (and their relatively more recent formal counterparts such as the ideas of nationhood, nationalism, nationality etc.) were forged out of an intuitive sense that those with whom you were able to communicate were of the same kind or 'ilk' as you. And the simple fact that you could understand your next-door neighbour and make him understand what you wanted him to know meant that you could posit a common language between the two of you. Thus, contrary to conventional wisdom, the availability of a common language is not a pre-condition for communication. If any-

thing, it is precisely the other way around: it is the very sensation that one is somehow able to communicate with the people around one that prompts one to hypostatise a common language for the group. *So-and-so speaks the same language as I do; therefore I understand that person* is a mistaken way of reporting the relation between language and communication. That relation is more accurately represented by the sentence: *So-and-so and I get along well with each other and can communicate to each other reasonably well; therefore we have a reason for positing a common language between us*. The existence of a language *x* is predicated upon the existence of a community of speakers who guarantee they can understand one another. (This may help explain at least partially why theorists of language who have relatively little interest in the social or communicative dimension of language prefer to talk of language in the abstract, rather than languages in the plural and in their individuating sense).

Languages and language loyalties have in the past often served as powerful rallying points and they continue to do so. The ancient Greeks for instance developed their sense of national/ethnic identity by observing how unlike the Barbarians they were. And the barbarians in turn were so called because their speech sounded like pure gibberish to the Greek ears. 'They speak differently from us; so they must be a different lot altogether' –such is the essence of the kind of perception that created group identities in ancient times. Of course, the ancient Greeks had no notion of nationhood in the modern sense of the term. Neither did they have the notion of what it was to be a foreigner. The Greek word ξένος (*xenos*) is ambiguous between the senses of 'stranger' and 'foreigner', a phenomenon attested to by the common etymology of the Portuguese words '*estranho*' and '*estrangeiro*' and their cognates in other Romance languages.

The concepts of nation and nationality are themselves of post-Renaissance origin and they only came to acquire their modern sense in the 19th century, largely in virtue of the geo-political climate in Europe marked by the spirit of colonialism and the ethnocentric sentiments aroused by the conquest and subjugation of alien territories and their peoples. As Renan (1990, p. 9) put it:

Nations [in the sense in which we understand the term today] are something fairly new in history. Antiquity was unfamiliar with them; Egypt, China and ancient Chaldea were in no way nations. They were flocks led by a Son of the Sun or by a Son of Heaven. Neither in Egypt nor in China were there citizens as such.

By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the idea of nationhood had become closely linked with the concept of *a* language (as opposed to language in its generic sense) and the whole equation was summed up in the slogan 'One nation, one people, one language'. Indeed so powerful was this newly postulated association that even someone of the intellectual calibre of Dr. Samuel Johnson fell into the trap of anachronistically tracing the history of nations to the availability of common languages. In his 1773 diary notes from a journey to the Hebrides, one comes across the following confident assertion:

What can a nation that has not letters tell of its original? ... There is no tracing ancient nations but by language, and therefore I am always sorry when language is lost, because *languages are the pedigree of nations*. (Emphasis added) (Dr. Johnson, cited in Snead, 1990, p. 231).

As Snead reminds us, Johnson's off-the-cuff remark nevertheless bespeaks a powerful *Zeitgeist* and is contemporaneous with the upsurge of a German nationalist ideology that was heralded by Herder and Novalis, and enthusiastically joined in later on by Fichte and Schleiermacher. No wonder that the trend inaugurated by these precursors of nationalism in Germany would find its fullest manifestation in such early 20th century concepts as that of *Sprachgeist* (the spirit of language) (cf. Vossler, 1932).

Summing up his discussion of the political interests that were at work in the formation of modern French identity, Greenfield (1998, p. 639) writes:

The example of France, one of the paradigmatic early nations, underscores the weakness of the theory which views national identity as a reflection of an objective unity and separateness based on primordial, 'ancestral' ethnic characteristics, and specifically on language.

Far from being a straightforward fact of the matter, nationality is a political banner and gives rise to such politically powerful feelings as nationalism –which in turn is all too frequently liable to degenerate into chauvinism and xenophobia, its flipside.

It seems reasonable to hypothesise that the idea of a language *x* first emerged as a result of man's first contact with another member of his own species with whom his efforts to communicate turned out to be of no avail and the new sense of self-awareness that resulted from this surprising discovery. In other words, knowledge of the existence of another tongue, must have been a crucial moment in the birth of the very notion of *a* language as opposed to language in the abstract.

We have already seen that it is the feeling that you are able to communicate with your fellows that must have led to the concept of a language and not the other way round. In the early history of our metalinguistic awareness, we did not use a common language to communicate; rather we posited a common language after noticing that we were able to communicate reasonably well with the ones in our daily contact –but this new sense of awareness could only have dawned on us after we had our first contact with a speaker whom we simply could not comprehend. The stranger/foreigner or rather his symbolic presence is a *sine qua non* for the formation of language identity. Ironically, no group identity could have consolidated itself without the constitutive presence of the radically other. It is not only the Greek sense of nationality or of a language of their own that needed the presence of the alien to manifest itself as such; Greek thought or philosophy also emerged and defined itself in opposition to ‘alien’ thought (often caricatured in the form of downright scepticism)– as in Platonic dialogues where the Greek savant typically introduces the figure of the stranger/foreigner as the incarnation and voice of unreason, to be systematically challenged and neutralised by dint of intense questioning by Socrates.

The very notion of a language x is thus constitutively dependent upon knowledge that there are forms of speech other than the one is conversant with. Furthermore, in order for there to be the notion of language x , it is absolutely essential that we convince ourselves that those alternative forms of speech are just as comprehensible to its speakers as ours is to ourselves. If the Greeks had not had any contact with the Barbarians, the sense of a distinct Hellenic language –and with it, a host of other related and derivative notions as nation, culture, art and so forth– simply would not have emerged. Historians tell us that the barbarians were initially thought of as less than humans, but the Greek sense of self-identity crucially depended upon the perception that they were just as human as the Greeks themselves, *only different*. The very identity of individual languages is forged out of an exclusionary gesture, but that identity is –true to all exclusionary strategies– dependent upon the continued symbolic presence of the Other for its permanence. (Rajagopalan, 1998a). Binary logics have long been recognised to derive their strength from the rather paradoxical condition that absolute difference will not count as true difference.

In the remaining part of this paper, I wish to focus on the politics of identity and how it affects questions of language loyalty and linguistic self-representation. Languages are, as I shall seek to sustain, flags

of allegiance and not simple or straightforward 'facts of the matter' as linguists and other language theorists frequently take them to be.

LINGUISTICS AND THE QUESTION OF LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

It is an amazing fact about modern linguistics that the identities of language and speakers of given languages have been treated as largely unproblematic. This is not to deny that one frequently comes across observations to the effect that the borderlines between languages and among dialects within one and same language are often difficult to specify with any amount of certainty. In a paper entitled 'Some issues on which linguists can agree' (Hudson, 1981), a paper based on an elaborate survey conducted some two decades or so ago among professional linguistics in the UK, one comes across the remark that "[t]here is no clear or qualitative difference between so-called language-boundaries' and 'dialect-boundaries'" (p. 336). But, as professional linguists embark on their routine business, they are prone to sweep underneath the carpet such vexatious issues. Surprisingly, some writers have even argued that "the word 'language' has a clear and correct use only as an individuating term" (cf. Wilson, 1959, p. 4, quoted in Harris, 1981, p. 13). But the standard practice amongst linguists has been to hijack the whole discussion from an examination of individual languages to speculation concerning language in the abstract (Rajagopalan, 1997a, b; 1998b), thus skirting a number of troublesome empirical issues about the identity of individual languages and, more importantly, some of the insuperable problems in coming up with reliable criteria for deciding the boundary lines. Consider the following excerpt from Moulton that illustrates the strategy at work:

Linguistics is the branch of learning which studies the languages of any and all societies: how each language is constructed; how it varies through space and changes through time; how it is related to other languages; how it is used by its speakers. Fundamental to all branches of linguistics is the basic question: What is language? (Moulton, 1969, p. 4).

What linguistics has, in other words, systematically fought shy of admitting is that the primary conditions for a language to be recognised as such are political. A language, as it has often been remarked with a rather dismissive shrug, is a dialect with an army and a navy. But the full implications of such casual observations are yet to be seriously countenanced by the professional linguist. Criteria such as the

possibility of mutual comprehension fail to produce satisfactory results when we confront, on the one hand, such cases as that of Hindi-Urdu which is practically a continuum of speech with words of Sanskrit and Arab origins occupying the polar extremes but are considered two distinct languages for reasons of the long-standing political and religious stand-off between India and Pakistan, and, on the other hand, cases such as the Venetian and the Neapolitan 'dialects' of modern Italian or the Mandarin or Cantonese dialects of what is vaguely referred to as Chinese that could very well be considered different languages were it not for the strong political interests at work in these cases. As pointed out earlier on in this paper, linguistic identity is a function of the political climate prevailing in given societies at specific historic moments. Where there are tensions and unresolved political disputes between warring factions, minor or even non-existing differences are blown up so as to justify the existence of different and 'mutually incomprehensible' languages. It is not that differences between languages actually impair communication between peoples; it is that people who do not want to communicate across their sectarian divides are apt to 'conjure up' linguistic differences where none in fact exists so as to justify their inability (or rather, *unwillingness*) to communicate. What this means is that the time-honoured, instrumental view of language, according to which natural languages are best approached as a *means* to communicate with one's peers, stands in urgent need of reformulation since it implies that it is the availability of a common language that makes communication between peoples possible and not the other way around, as I have been at pains to press home.

When all is said and done, the truth of the matter is that linguists are yet to come up with a purely linguistic or formal definition of a what 'a language' is: as opposed to language in its generic or abstract sense. Indeed it is no exaggeration to venture the remark that, if there is one most embarrassing but closely guarded secret that modern linguistics has had to live with, it is that, after nearly a century of intense research and phenomenal expansion and consolidation as an academically respectable discipline, the science of language still has to have recourse to external (non-linguistic) criteria such as geo-political considerations when it comes to demarcating the exact bounds of a given language.

The upshot of the foregoing discussion is that languages are different or same, depending on the political interests of those whose opinions matter in these circumstances. There are a number of histor-

ically attested cases that favour such a conclusion. Leaving aside such rare cases of language being practically produced from a drawing-board in answer to political expediency – a most telling example from recent history being the birth of modern Hebrew, we also have such very recent cases as the attempt by the late Croatian president Franjo Tudjman to deliberately Croat-ise the common Serbio-Croatian that his country shares with its erst-while partner Serbia. As Treanor (1997, p. 69) reported: “If he is not shot or deposed, it is not impossible that Tudjman will make Serbian and Croatian mutually incomprehensible in 20 years’ time”. Tudjman himself did not live long enough to see his dream translated into reality and only time will tell if the language he wished to help create will become a reality in the years to come. Anyhow, we have here a perfect example (albeit not yet carried through to its full realisation) of a language being created in order to satisfy the vested interests of a political party or a despotic national leader.

The birth of Bangla Desh in the early 1970s is another clear example of a language –Bengali– that was politically exploited as a banner to further the objective of independence from a nation founded on the principle of religion, believed by its founding fathers to be strong enough to hold together an ethnically and linguistic diverse mass of people. So too is the ongoing struggle of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. Once again, the question of language became a useful weapon and a rallying cry in the hands of a group of rebels fighting for independence and Tamil became, all of a sudden, a flag of allegiance. In point of fact, languages are used as flags of allegiance much more often than we ordinarily think. Other interesting examples of a minority language resisting extinction by serving as a symbol of ethnic identity include the case of Catalan (cf. Woolard, 1989) and that of Mexicano (Aztec) (cf. Hill and Hill, 1986). Perhaps the best example of a language being used as the rallying cry for the formation of a new sense of national identity is the recent case of East Timore, where Portuguese, spoken today by only 5 per cent of the population, has been elected as the national language –as a clear indication to their next-door neighbours and former colonial occupiers that they will henceforth ‘have no truck with them’– as if they were telling their former colonial masters: “From now on, we will be speaking a language that you do not understand; and that is our way of letting you know that we have had enough of you and have no further interest in communicating with you”. Like persons, nations too are given to opting out of being on ‘speaking terms’ with their former ‘friends’ and current enemies.

IDENTITY AND ITS VICISSITUDES

The post-World War II era has witnessed contacts among nations and peoples increasing at an incredibly rapid rate and with it the progressive dismantling of barriers, be they geo-political, cultural, or even linguistic. More and more people are becoming proficient in more than one language, often as many as three or four languages. So much so that multilingualism is fast becoming the norm rather than the exception in many countries. Even in countries that traditionally were looked upon as rigorously monolingual, multilingualism has been spreading at an impressive rate – a case in point being Great Britain which, according to Stubbs (1986, p. 15), is today “socially multilingual”. Equally important, though much less noticed, is the fact that many of the linguistic transactions routinely carried out in our globalised world are actually being carried out in mixed languages such as the Canadian ‘*franglais*’, South American ‘*portunhol*’ and the North American ‘*spanglish*’ – much to the dismay of language puritans.

These recent developments have a tremendous impact on the very identity of individual languages and also that of the speakers of those languages, because these identities can no longer be thought of in ‘all or nothing’ terms, contrary to the received wisdom in linguistics. Ours is an age of Protean identities, whose hall-mark is volatility and easy adaptability to changing circumstances. Instead of the fixed identities that, in the ages past, privileges of birth or station in life were believed to confer upon persons, our identities have largely become a matter of ‘self-fashioning’ (cf. Taylor, 1992).

However, what we must not lose sight of as we ponder the post-modern phenomenon of the dissipation and rehashing of identities is that the question of identity is fast becoming a politically loaded issue. As Pandit (1975, p. 178) has remarked:

‘Loyalty’ to language is probably not as external to linguistics as it may appear to be. An enormous amount of social and cultural information is encoded in a message; verbal interaction in a speech community is a cultural event; it reinforces sense of belonging and asserts one’s existence in a community. In this sense, identity with language is not external, not a superposition –political or social– but an intrinsic linguistic trait. The speaker’s attachment to his variety and his language is symptomatic of the cultural load his language carries for him.

In the emergent world order marked by instability and cultural intermixing at an unprecedented rate, we are constantly being asked to

negotiate our identities in response to pressures from all sides. In the case of our linguistic identities, the issue is further complicated by the fact that certain languages such as English have been found to be playing a hegemonic role, threatening the very survival of local and minority languages all over the world. In the countries of North, Central and South America, many of the indigenous languages are also widely known to be dying at an alarming rate (Rubin, 1968; Solé, 1995). If, on the one hand, globalisation has helped foster linguistic hybridity, it has also, on the other hand –and in what may appear to be a trend precisely in the opposite direction– contributed to the spread of certain languages and the consequent disappearance of others (cf. Calvet, 1974; Brenzinger, 1992; Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995).

Against the backdrop sketched above, it has been my central objective in this paper to plead that there is an urgent need to foreground the issue of language politics. As a preliminary step, I advance the idea that languages are best viewed as flags of allegiance rather than straightforward facts of the matter (cf. Rajagopalan, Forthcoming; In preparation). This means, among other things, that such familiar phenomena as code-switching are best approached as politically motivated and symptomatic of language-related tensions that are operative in given social set-ups (Canagarajah, 1995; Siegel, 1995) and also that such time-honoured concepts as ‘mother-tongue’ and ‘native speakerhood’ are to be approached as political rather than linguistic issues. Finally, languages themselves (as opposed to ‘language’ in its generic or abstract sense) reveal themselves, on close examination, to be political entities rather than simply linguistic facts.

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