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Language, Culture, and National Identity

BY ERIC HOBSBAWM

LANGUAGE, culture, and national identity is the title of my paper, but its central subject is the situation of languages in cultures, written or spoken languages still being the main medium of these. More specifically, my subject is “multiculturalism” insofar as this depends on language. “Nations” come into it, since in the states in which we all live political decisions about how and where languages are used for public purposes (for example, in schools) are crucial. And these states are today commonly identified with “nations” as in the term *United Nations*. This is a dangerous confusion. So let me begin with a few words about it.

Since there are hardly any colonies left, practically all of us today live in independent and sovereign states. With the rarest exceptions, even exiles and refugees live in states, though not their own. It is fairly easy to get agreement about what constitutes such a state, at any rate the modern model of it, which has become the template for all new independent political entities since the late eighteenth century. It is a territory, preferably coherent and demarcated by frontier lines from its neighbors, within which *all* citizens without exception come under the exclusive rule of the territorial government and the rules under which it operates. Against this there is no appeal, except by authoritarian of that government; for even the superiority of European Community law over national law was established only by the decision of the constituent

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governments of the Community. Within the state's territory all are citizens who are born and live there except those specifically excluded as "foreigners" by the state, which also has the power to admit people to citizenship—but not, in democratic states, to deprive them of it. Foreigners are taken to belong to some other territorial state, though the growth of inhumanity since World War I has produced a growing, and now very large, body of officially invisible denizens for whom special terms had to be devised in our tragic century: "stateless," "apatride," "illegal immigrant," or whatever.

At some time, mainly since the end of the nineteenth century, the inhabitants of this state have been identified with an "imagined community" bonded together, as it were laterally, by such things as language, culture, ethnicity, and the like. The ideal of such a state is represented by an ethnically, culturally, and linguistically homogeneous population. We now know that this standing invitation to "ethnic cleansing" is dangerous and completely unrealistic, for out of the almost 200 states today only about a dozen correspond to this program. Moreover, it would have surprised the founders of the original nation-states. For them, the unity of the nation was *political* and not socio-anthropological. It consisted in the decision of a sovereign people to live under common laws and a common constitution, irrespective of culture, language, and ethnic composition. "A nation," said the Abbé Sieyès, with habitual French lucidity, "is the totality of individuals united by living under a common law and represented by the same legislative assembly" (Schieder, 1985, p. 122). The assumption that communities of ethnic descent, language, culture, religion, and so on ought to find expression in territorial states, let alone in a single territorial state, was, of course, equally new. It could actually be a reversal of historic values, as in Zionism. "Strangers have arisen," wrote an orthodox rabbi in 1900,

who say that the people of Israel should be clothed in secular nationalism, a nation like all other nations, that Judaism rests on

three things, national feeling, the land and the language, and that national feeling is the most praiseworthy element in the brew and the most effective in preserving Judaism, while the observance of the Torah and the commandments is a private matter depending on the inclination of each individual. May the Lord rebuke these evil men and may He who chooseth Jerusalem seal their mouths (Kedourie, 1960, p. 76).

The Dzikover Rebbe, whom I have here quoted, undoubtedly represented the tradition of Judaism.

A third observation brings me closer to the main theme of this lecture. The concept of a *single*, exclusive, and unchanging ethnic or cultural or other identity is a dangerous piece of brainwashing. Human mental identities are not like shoes, of which we can only wear one pair at a time. We are all multi-dimensional beings. Whether a Mr. Patel in London will think of himself primarily as an Indian, a British citizen, a Hindu, a Gujarati-speaker, an ex-colonist from Kenya, a member of a specific caste or kin-group, or in some other capacity depends on whether he faces an immigration officer, a Pakistani, a Sikh or Moslem, a Bengali-speaker, and so on. There is no single platonic essence of Patel. He is all these and more at the same time. David Selbourne, a London ideologue, calls on “the Jew in England” to “cease to pretend to be English” and to recognize that his “real” identity is as a Jew. The only people who face us with such either-or choices are those whose policies have led or could lead to genocide.

Moreover, historically multiple identity lies behind even national homogeneity. Every German in the past, and vestigially even today, had *simultaneously* two or three identities: as members of a “tribe”—the Saxons, the Swabians, the Franks—a German principality or state, and a linguistic culture combining a single standard *written* language for all Germans with a variety of spoken dialects, some of which also had begun to develop a written literature. (The Reformation brought not only one, but several Bible translations into German languages.) Indeed, until Hitler, people were regarded as

Germans *by virtue of being* Bavarians, Saxons, or Swabians who could often understand one another only when they spoke the written standard culture-language.

This brings me naturally to my central theme of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Both are historically novel as concepts. They could not arise until the combination of three circumstances: the aspiration to universal literacy, the political mobilization of the common people, and a particular form of linguistic nationalism.

Historically, the coexistence of peoples of different languages and cultures is normal; or, rather, nothing is less common than countries inhabited exclusively by people of a single uniform language and culture. Even in Iceland, with its 300,000 inhabitants, such uniformity is only maintained by a ruthless policy of Icelandization, including forcing every immigrant to take an ancient Icelandic name. At the time of the French Revolution, only half the inhabitants of France could speak French, and only 12–13 percent spoke it “correctly”; and the extreme case is Italy, where at the moment it became a state only 2 or 3 Italians out of a hundred actually used the Italian language at home. So long as most people lived in an oral universe, there was no necessary link between the spoken and the written language of the literate minority. So long as reading and writing were strictly affairs for specialized minorities, it did not even have to be a living language. The administration of India in the 1830s switched from written classical Persian, which nobody in India spoke, to written English, which was equally incomprehensible. If illiterates needed to communicate with those who spoke other languages, they relied on intermediaries who could speak or else learned enough of the older language to get by, or developed pidgins or creoles which became unwritten but effective means of communication and have become a fashionable topic for study among linguists.

A single national language only became important when ordinary citizens became an important component of the state;

and the written language had to have a relation to the spoken language only when these citizens were supposed to read and write it. But remember that universal primary education, outside of a few exceptional countries, is not much more than a century old.

The original case for a standard language was entirely democratic, not cultural. How could citizens understand, let alone take part in, the government of their country if it was conducted in an incomprehensible language—for example, in Latin, as in the Hungarian parliament before 1840? Would this not guarantee government by an elite minority? This was the argument of the Abbé Gregoire in 1794 (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 103 n). Education in French was, therefore, essential for French citizens, whatever the language they spoke at home. This remained essentially the position in the United States, another product of the same age of democratic revolution. To be a citizen, an immigrant had to pass a test in English, and readers of *The Education of Hyman Kaplan* will be familiar with this process of linguistic homogenization. I need not add that Mr. Kaplan's struggles with the English language were not intended to stop him from talking Yiddish with his wife at home, which he certainly did; nor did they affect his children, who obviously went to English-speaking public schools. What people spoke or wrote among themselves was nobody's business but their own, like their religion. You will remember that even in 1970—that is to say before the onset of the present wave of mass immigration—33 million Americans, plus an unknown percentage of another 9 million who did not answer the relevant question, said that English was not their mother-tongue. Over three quarters of them were second generation or older American-born (Thernstrom et al., 1980, p. 632).

In practice, education in languages other than the standard national language was traditionally left to private effort, to special voluntary provision by minority communities, as in the case of the Czech Comenius schools which were set up in

Vienna after 1918 with help from the Czech government for the large Czech minority in the city, or by local option, as often happened in America. Thus, bilingual education in English and German was introduced in Cincinnati in 1840. Most such arrangements—and there were several in the second half of the century—had quietly faded away by the time the demand for official federal bilingual education surfaced in the 1960s and 1970s. Let me say that this was a *political* rather than an educational demand. It was part of the rise of a new kind of ethnic and identity politics during this period.

The situation was different, of course, where there was no single predominant national language, spoken or even written, or where a linguistic community resented the superior status of another language. In the multinational Habsburg empire, “the language of (public) office and school” became a political issue from 1848, as it did somewhat later in Belgium and Finland. The usual minimum formula here was—and I quote the Hungarian Nationality Law of 1868—that people should be educated in their own language at primary school level and under certain circumstances at secondary school level, and that they should be allowed to use it directly or through interpreters in dealings with public authorities. (But note that what was a language was *politically* defined. It did not include Yiddish nor the creole spoken in Istria, where experts in the 1850s counted thirteen different national varieties [Wörtsdörfer, 1994, p. 206].) To have a language, as distinct from a dialect or “jargon,” you needed to be classified as a nation or nationality. The minimum formula could work in areas of solid settlement by one language group, and local or even regional government could be substantially conducted in what was called the “language of common use” (*Umgangssprache*), but it raised big problems in areas of mixed settlement and in most cities. The real educational issue, of course, was not primary, but secondary and tertiary education. This is where the major battles were fought. Here, the issue was not mass literacy, but the linguistic status of unofficial elites. For we must remember

that until World War II not more than 2 percent of the age group 15–19 went to high school, even in countries with a reputation for democracy like Denmark and the Netherlands. Under the circumstances, any Fleming or Finn who had gotten to university level was certainly capable of pursuing it in French or Swedish. In short, once again the issue was not educational, but political.

Basically, this system of one official language per country became part of everyone's aspiration to become a nation-state, though special arrangements had to be made for minorities which insisted on them. Multilingual nations like Switzerland were regarded as freaks; and *de facto*, given the great cantonal autonomy of that country, even Switzerland is hardly multilingual because every canton except one—Grisons—is in fact monoglot. Colonies winning their independence after World War II automatically thought in terms of some home-grown national language as the base of national education and culture—Urdu in Pakistan, Hindi in India, Sinhala in Sri Lanka, Arabic in Algeria. As we shall see in a moment, this was a dangerous delusion. Small peoples which define themselves ethnic-linguistically still hanker after this ideal of homogeneity: Latvia only for Lettish-speakers, Moldavia only for Rumanians. As it so happened in 1940, when this area once again passed to Russia, almost half its population consisted not of Rumanians, but of Ukrainians, Russians, Bulgarians, Turks, Jews, and a number of other groups (Seton-Watson, 1977, p. 182). Let us be clear: in the absence of a willingness to change languages, national linguistic homogeneity in multi-ethnic and multi-lingual areas can be achieved only by mass compulsion, expulsion, or genocide. Poland, which had a third non-Polish population in 1939, is today overwhelmingly Polish, but only because its Germans were expelled to the West, its Lithuanians, Bielorusians, and Ukrainians were detached to form part of the USSR in the East, and its Jews were murdered. Let me add that neither Poland nor any other homogeneous country can *stay*

homogeneous in the present world of mass labour migration, mass flight, mass travel, and mass urbanization except, once again, by ruthless exclusion or the creation *de jure* or *de facto* of apartheid societies.

The case for the privileged use of any language as the only language of education and culture in a country is, thus, political and ideological or, at best, pragmatic. Except in one respect, it is not educational. Universal literacy is extremely difficult to achieve in a written language that has no relation to the spoken vernacular—and it may be impossible unless the parents and the community are particularly anxious for their children to become literate in that language, as is the case with most immigrants into anglophone countries today. Whether this requires formal bilingual education is another matter. Basically, the demand for official education in a language other than the already established one, when this does not bring obvious advantages to the learners, is a demand for recognition or for power or for status, not for easier learning. However, it may also be a demand for ensuring the survival and development of a non-competitive language otherwise likely to fade away. Whether official institutionalization is necessary to achieve this today is an interesting question, but, according to the best expert in the field, bilingual education alone will not do the trick (Fishman, 1980, p. 636).

Let me just add one important point. Any language that moves from the purely oral to the realm of reading and writing, that is, *a fortiori* any language that becomes a medium for school teaching or official use, changes its character. It has to be standardized in grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and perhaps pronunciation. And its lexical range has to be extended to cover new needs. At least a third of the vocabulary of modern Hebrew has been formed in the twentieth century, since biblical Hebrew, rather like the Welsh of the *Mabinogion*, belonged to a people of ancient herdsmen and peasants. The established culture-languages of modern states—Italian, Spanish, French, English, German, Russian, and one or two

others—went through this phase of social engineering before the nineteenth century. Most of the world's written languages did so in the past hundred years, insofar as they were "modernized," and some, like Basque, are still in the process of doing so. The very process of turning language into a medium of writing destroys it as a vernacular. Suppose we say, as champions of African-Americans sometimes say: our kids should not be taught in standard English, which is a language they do not speak, but in their own black English, which is not a "wrong" version of standard English, but an independent idiom of its own. So it may be. But if you turned it into a school language, it would cease to be the language that the kids speak. A distinguished French historian, whose native language was Flemish, once said: "The Flemish they now learn in school in Flanders is not the language the mothers and grandmothers of Flanders taught their children." It is no longer a "mother tongue" in the literal sense. A lady who looked after my apartment in New York, bilingual in Spanish and Galician like all from her region in Spain, has difficulty in understanding the purified and standardized Gallego which is now an official language in Galicia. It is not the language of common use in the region, but a new social construct.

What I have said so far may be true or not, but it is now largely out of date. For three things have happened which were not thought of in the heyday of nationalism and are still not thought of by the dangerous late-comers to nationalism. First, we no longer live entirely in a culture of reading and writing. Second, we no longer live in a world where the idea of a single all-purpose national language is generally feasible, that is, we live in a *necessarily* plurilingual world. And third, we live in an era when at least for the time being there is a single language for universal global communication, namely, a version of English.

The first development is basically the effect of film and television and, above all, the small portable radio. It means that spoken vernacular languages are no longer only face-to-face,

domestic, or restricted idioms. Illiterates are, therefore, directly within the reach of the wider world and wider culture. This may also mean that small languages and dialects can survive more easily, insofar as even a modest population is enough to justify a local radio program. Minority languages, thus, can be cheaply provided for. However, exposure to some bigger language through the media may speed up linguistic assimilation. On balance, radio favors small language, television has been hostile to them, but this may no longer be true when cable and satellite television are as accessible as FM radio.¹ In short, it is no longer necessary to make a language *official* if it is to be moved out of the home and off the street into the wider world. Of course, none of this means that illiterates are not at a severe and growing disadvantage compared to literates, whether in written languages or in computer languages.

In Europe, national standard languages were usually based on a combination of dialects spoken by the main state people which was transformed into a literary idiom. In the postcolonial states, this is rarely possible, and when it is, as in Sri Lanka, the results of giving Sinhalese exclusive official status have been disastrous. In fact, the most convenient “national languages” are either *lingua francas* or pidgins developed purely for intercommunication between peoples who do not talk each others’ languages, like Swahili, Pilipino, or Bahasa Indonesia, or former imperial languages like English in India and Pakistan. Their advantages are that they are neutral between the languages actually spoken and put no one group at a particular advantage or disadvantage. Except, of course, the elite. The price India pays for conducting its affairs in English as an insurance against language-based civil wars such as that in Sri Lanka is that people who have not had the several years full-time education which make a person fluent in a foreign written language will never make it above a relatively modest level in public affairs or—today—in business. That price is worth paying, I think. Nevertheless, imagine the effect

on Europe if Hindi were the only language of general communication in the European parliament, and the London *Times*, *Le Monde*, and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* could be read only by those literate in Hindi.

All this is changing, or will profoundly change, the relation of languages to each other in multinational societies. The ambition of all languages in the past which aspired to the status of national languages and to be the basis of national education and culture was to be all-purpose languages at all levels, that is, interchangeable with the major culture-languages. Especially, of course, with the dominant language against which they tried to establish themselves. Thus, in Finland, Finnish was to be capable of replacing Swedish for all purposes, in Belgium Flemish of replacing French. Hence, the real triumph of linguistic emancipation was to set up a vernacular university: in the history of Finland, Wales, and the Flemish movement, the date when such a university was established is a major date in nationalist history. A lot of smaller languages have tried to do this over the past centuries, starting, I suppose, with Dutch in the seventeenth century and ending, so far, with Catalan. Some are still trying to do it, like Basque.

Now in practice this is ceasing to be the case operationally, although small-nation nationalism does what it can to resist the trend. Languages once again have niches and are used in different situations and for different purposes. Therefore, they do not need to cover the same ground. This is partly because for international purposes only a few languages are actually used. Though the administration of the European Union spends one-third of its income on translation from and into all the eleven languages in it which have official status, it is a safe bet that the overwhelming bulk of its actual work is conducted in not more than three languages. Again, while it is perfectly possible to devise a vocabulary for writing papers in molecular biology in Estonian, and for all I know this has been done, nobody who wishes to be read—except by the other Estonian molecular biologists—will write such papers. They

will need to write them in internationally current languages, as even the French and the Germans have to do in such fields as economics. Only if the number of students coming into higher education is so large and if they are recruited from monoglot families is there a sound educational reason for a full vernacular scientific vocabulary—and then only for introductory textbooks; for all more advanced purposes, students will have to learn enough of an international language to read the literature, and probably they also will have to learn enough of the kind of English which is today for intellectuals what Latin was in the Middle Ages. It would be realistic to give all university education in certain subjects in English today, as is partly done in countries like the Netherlands and Finland which once were the pioneers of turning local vernaculars into all-purpose languages. There is no other way. Officially, nineteenth-century Hungary succeeded in making Magyar into such an all-purpose language for everything from poetry to nuclear physics. In practice, since only 10 million out of the world's 6000 million speak it, every educated Hungarian has to be, and is, plurilingual.

What we have today are not interchangeable, but complementary languages, whatever the official position. In Switzerland, there is no pressure to turn the spoken idiom of *Schwyzerdütsch* into a written language because there is no political objection to using high German, English, and French for this purpose. (In Catalunya, the cost of turning Catalan into an all-purpose language is to deprive poor and uneducated inhabitants of this bilingual region of the native advantage of speaking and writing one of the few major international languages, namely, Spanish.) In Paraguay everybody speaks Guaraní (well, strictly speaking 45 percent of the population are bilingual), the Indian language which has ever since the colony served as a regional *lingua franca*. However, though it has long had equal rights, so far as I can see it is written chiefly for purposes of *felles letters*; for all other purposes, Spanish is used. It is extremely unlikely that in Peru,

where Quechua (rightly) acquired official standing in the 1970s, there will be much demand either for daily newspapers or university education in that language. Why should there be? Even in Barcelona, where Catalan is universally spoken by the locals, the great majority of daily papers read, including the Catalan edition of national papers, are in Spanish. As for the typical third-world state, as I have pointed out, they cannot possibly have just one all-purpose language.

This is the situation which has encouraged the rise of *lingua francas* in countries and regions and of English as a worldwide medium of communication. Such pidgins or creoles may be culture and literary languages, but that is not their main purpose. Medieval clerk's Latin had very little to do with Virgil and Cicero. They may or may not become official languages—for countries do need languages of general public communication—but when they do, they should avoid becoming monopoly culture-languages. And the less we let the poets get their hands on such communication languages the better, for poetry encourages both incommunicability and linguistic nationalism. However, such languages are tempted to let themselves be dominated by bureaucratic or technical jargon since this is their primary use. This also should be fought in the interests of clarity. Since American English is already one of the most jargon-ridden idioms ever invented, the danger is real.

Let me conclude with some remarks about what one might call purely political languages—that is, languages which are created specifically as symbols of nationalist or regionalist aspiration, generally for separatist or secessionist purposes. The case for these is non-existent. The extreme example is the attempted reconstitution of the Cornish language, last spoken in the mid-eighteenth century, which has no other purpose except to demarcate Cornwall from England. Such constructed languages may succeed, like Hebrew in Israel—that is, they may turn into real spoken and living languages—or they may fail, like the attempt by nationalist poets between the wars to turn the Scots dialect into a literary language (“Lallans”), but

neither communication nor culture is the object of such exercises. These are extreme cases, but all languages have elements of such political self-assertion, for in an era of national or regional secessionism there is a natural tendency to complement political independence by linguistic separatism. We can see this happening in Croatia at the moment. It has the additional advantage of providing a privileged zone of employment for a body of nationalist or regionalist militants, as in Wales. Let me repeat: politics and not culture is at the core of this language manipulation, as the experts in the study of language purism have established.² Czech language purism was directed mainly at the elimination of *German* elements but did not resist the mass influx of French borrowings or the old Latin loan-words (Jernudd and Shapiro, 1989, p. 218). This is natural enough. The Ruthenes do not define themselves as a “nation” with a “language” in general, but specifically against the Ukrainians (Magocsi, 1992). Catalan nationalism is directed exclusively against Spain, just as linguistic Welsh nationalism is directed exclusively against English.

However, there is today a new element encouraging the political creation of languages, namely, the systematic regionalization of states, which assimilated regions without special linguistic, ethnic, or other characteristics, to the potentially separatist areas—for example, Murcia to Catalonia. If Spain is a guide, this will lead to the creation of localized “official” languages, no doubt eventually—as in Catalunya—demanding monopoly status. What is true of Valencia today may be true of Picardy tomorrow.

This raises the specter of general Balkanization. Given the European Union’s policy of favoring regions against existing nation-states, which is *de facto* a policy favoring separatism, as the Scots and Catalan nationalists have quickly recognized, this is a real problem. Balkanization will not solve any problems of linguistic and cultural identity. We shall continue as before. Brussels may spend one-third of its income on translation and interpretation, and if Europe can afford it, why not? But the

affairs of the community will not be primarily or at all conducted in Portuguese or Greek or even Danish and Dutch. What linguistic Balkanization will do is to multiply the occasions for conflict. If the Croats can create a separate language for themselves out of the unified Serbocroat which their forefathers constructed to unify the southern Slavs—not with much success—then anybody can. So long as language is not as firmly separated from the state as religion was in the United States under the American constitution, it will be a constant and generally artificial source of civil strife.

Let us remember the Tower of Babel. It remained forever uncompleted because God condemned the human race to everlasting linguistic conflict.

Notes

¹ In New York, in 1994, television programs were available in Italian, French, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Polish, Greek, and even occasionally in Albanian—though only at certain times of day, except for Spanish.

² See Jernudd and Shapiro, 1989.

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