

How ideology forges languages

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There are many ways in which power relations are manifested, and potentially reproduced, through the use of language. Some of them have at least a moderate level of familiarity among non-specialists, as reflected by discussions about issues like gender-neutral language or language and race. Here, I am interested in a different issue that touches on the very concept of language and its political exploitation.

The phenomenon that I invite you to consider is striking by virtue of its conspicuous lack of remarkability from a modern point of view. Most people will have no problem interpreting Figs. 1 and 2, probably most readily as a symbol for speaking or learning Modern Greek or German respectively. Comparable examples abound if you look at the frontpages of teaching material for most major languages or, for example, the first few minutes of the 1976 animated movie *The Twelve Tasks of Asterix*, where the hero greets the viewers in various languages accompanied by little flags in the corner of the screen.



Figure 2



Figure 1

Here, national flags are used as symbols for specific languages to which they are associated in some way. This seems perfectly normal and reasonable. Let us consider why it seems so reasonable, before considering why it might be worth being a little bit puzzled after all. Probably the most straightforward connection between a flag and a language is the case when the former is the official symbol of a state and the latter its official language. Hence, the link is one between two state institutions. This can be illustrated by the difficulties arising when trying to come up with an interpretation for Fig. 3 (apart from recognising the South African flag). Since South Africa has not one but eleven official languages, the utility of the flag as a symbol for a specific language breaks down.

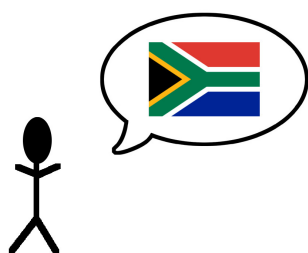


Figure 3

The ideological underpinnings of why the interpretation of Figs. 1 and 2 comes so easily seem to lie in the assumption that there is one language per nation-state. This obviously draws on the political ideology of nationalism and its goal "that the political and the national unit should be congruent" in the words of Ernest Gellner (*Nations and Nationalism*, 1983, p. 1), which has shaped the way in which the social and political world is perceived since around the 18th century. It is crucial to note that the stipulation about languages is not a necessary characteristic of nationalism (consider for example the Indian struggle for independence, which did not aim for a monolingual state). Especially ethnically based nationalisms, however, seem to have a propensity for cultural homogeneity, which would assume, by extension, that linguistic homogeneity would somehow represent a natural state of human communities.

There are several things worth noting at this point. There does not seem to be such a direct relationship between ethnicity and language, since there seem to be mismatches both ways. The case of multiple languages spoken within one ethnic group is exemplified by the Greek community in Georgia. Although some of its members natively speak Pontic Greek, an Indo-European language, and some speak Urum, a Turkic language, they reportedly perceive of themselves as Greek in the same way (cf. <http://www.boell.de/de/node/277595>).

A case of multiple ethnic groups speaking basically the same language is encountered in the former Yugoslavian republics. There is little doubt that the people in Fig. 4 will understand each other (linguistically at least), so while their languages might officially be called Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian, there are no linguistic reasons to assume that they speak a different language.



Figure 4

This finally leads us to a set of questions pertaining to the notion of language itself, which seem to be hardly noticed at all outside the linguistic community. What is it that we actually talk about when we speak of language?

Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* suggests to distinguish between *langage* (faculty of language), *langue* (the abstract rules of a signifying system such as "English") and *parole* (concrete instances of use of a langue). The generative approach initiated by Noam Chomsky introduces yet another aspect, namely I(nternalised)-language, roughly concerned with the question: What does a person know when they know a language?

These linguistic approaches to "language" crucially do not attempt to answer another question: What characterises a language like English or a speaker of English as such? This is, however, not a problem of a given linguistic theory because the relevant factors are mainly sociopolitical than linguistic ones. In spite of claims to the contrary (recently by Harry Ritchie in a somewhat misinformed article in the *Guardian* from 31 December 2013: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/31/one-way-speak-english-standard-spoken-british-linguistics-chomsky>), Chomsky acknowledges the problems associated with this "commonplace notion of language", for instance in his 1986 *Knowledge of Language* (p. 15f.). He simply doubts "that any coherent account can be given of 'language' in this sense", precisely because of its "crucial sociopolitical dimension" and therefore suggests that it be left aside in scientific approaches to understanding the human language faculty. The incoherence introduced by this dimension is aptly captured in the oft-quoted observation attributed to an audience member at a lecture by Max Weinreich: "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy." Hence, political interests play a major role in determining the boundaries of a given "language" in this sense.

This is fairly obvious in the case of former Yugoslavia mentioned earlier, where there are serious political efforts of building separate *national* languages in the respective countries. Consider for instance a footnote in the programme of a recent linguistic conference in Croatia which criticised the use of the term Serbo-Croatian in a paper title as "an ideologically motivated anachronistic declaration" for implying that the people in Fig. 4 speak the same language (cf. http://mmm9.ffzg.unizg.hr/?page_id=10) or Snežana Kordić's extensive work on these issues in the Croatian setting.

While these are examples of what might be called "hot nationalisms", we can now finally return

to our initial examples. Against the background of our discussion, the ready association of Figs. 1 and 2 with Standard Modern Greek and Standard German (*Hochdeutsch*), unimpeded by the existence of several other languages and a variety of "dialects" spoken on the territory of the nation-states in question may be analysed as the result of the power exerted by the prominent language. This can be extended to the very act of naming languages, which inadvertently abstracts over the differences between neighbouring language varieties (and all the more between individual speakers' grammars). Once there appears a standardised form of a language that institutionalises this abstraction, the act of naming a language becomes an expression of the dominance of the standardised form, and by extension the - usually centralising - political relations administrating and maintaining the standardisation.

The fact that this phenomenon is so unremarkable, represents a brilliant example of *banal nationalism* (cf. Michael Billig's 1995 book of the same name), namely the process of reminding citizens "of their national place in a world of nations" in a way that "is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding" (p. 8). So when the process of naming leads to the impression that a certain subpart of a dialectal continuum forms a "natural" unit, we can identify the same metaphysics as those associated with the naturalness of national distinctions. To quote Michael Billig's *Banal Nationalism* (p. 10): "The assumption that different languages 'naturally' exist illustrates just how deeply nationalist conceptions have seeped into contemporary common sense."

To conclude, it is necessary for linguistic practice to make general statements over related or similar groups of grammars, and in most cases there is no practical alternative to using commonplace language names for those abstract groups. Nevertheless, while doing so it seems important to be mindful of the different notions of "language" and the underlying ideologies connected to many of these namings.