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The German Language and the Real World

*Sociolinguistic, Cultural, and Pragmatic Perspectives
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3 Germanness: Language and Nation

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I THE NATION-STATE

'It distinguishes the Germans', Nietzsche (1978: 131) once sighed, 'that they never get tired of asking who they are.' Although the Germans are hardly alone in indulging in the pastime of searching for an identity, Nietzsche pinpointed a noteworthy aspect of the spiritual make-up of one of Europe's belated nations. Before the Napoleonic wars Germany, as well as Italy, had not existed as a nation-state in even rudimentary form. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, Germany had not only joined the ranks of the more traditional nation-states, but become a nation-state superpower. A great deal of intellectual energy during that century was spent accompanying and digesting this process of nation-building. As a result, nation and state, which are usually identified in the Anglo-Saxon world as well as in France, are conceptually very distinct in Germany.

In spite of Germany's special status as a latecomer among Europe's major nation-states, it must not be forgotten that the idea of national self-determination is a modern one. As Hobsbawm (1990) has shown, the nation-state, in any variety that would be recognizable to us today, is no older than the American Constitution and the French Revolution. In the two centuries since then, the nation-state became the most important principle of political organization the world over. Two hundred years after the French, in the name of universalism, had ignited the fire of nationalism that would spread across Europe, at a time when the emergence of global problems made some believe, or hope, that the age of nations was past, Germany has reaffirmed the principle of the nation-state by bringing to an end what not a few of its neighbours also found 'unnatural': the coexistence of two states of one nation or, as it was more commonly put, the division of one nation into two polities.

Clearly, the nation-state is as much alive at the end of the twentieth century as it was at its beginning. Unwittingly, perhaps, Germany has

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once again epitomized important socio-political developments that have changed the political landscape in Europe. It will be up to historians to assess their full significance. In the present context we shall pursue a more modest aim. Since the catastrophe of the Nazi regime, nationalism has not been a respectable sentiment in Germany. Yet the recreation of a German nation-state in 1990 did not meet with much resistance. Was this because the nation-state ideology was so firmly entrenched among Germany's neighbours that it was impossible to follow another path, or is the resurrected German nation-state a 'natural' outcome of the 'Germanness' of its people, what in modern parlance has come to be called 'national identity'? Both have probably contributed to some extent and, if this is so, it may be of some interest to know what German identity consists in or is believed to consist in. Even this is too ambitious a question, however. We shall, therefore, concentrate on what is usually considered a key element of national identity and undoubtedly has played a crucial role in the creation of the German nation-state, the national language.

2 THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE AS A SOURCE OF LEGITIMACY

When Europe's most successful multilingual empire, the Habsburg monarchy, disintegrated, Max Weber (1956: 242) commented on the relationship between nation, state, and language as follows: 'Indeed, "nation state" has become conceptually identical with "state" based on a common language.' Prior to the French Revolution this had not been so: the identity of language, state, and nation was not an important issue. Why then did it develop into a powerful political motive in nineteenth-century Europe? The answer lies in both political and economic developments.

Kelman (1971) has identified two sources of legitimacy for a national system. The first is the population's 'sentimental attachment toward the nation'. The second is that the national system must meet the material needs of the population: this he calls 'instrumental attachment toward the nation'. As for his first criterion, it must be noted that in eighteenth-century Europe the sentimental attachment of the power élite to the nation was underdeveloped. The social barriers separating the populations of the many kingdoms and princely states from the dominant class were more pronounced than the national commonalities that united rulers and ruled. The most conspicuous evidence of this state of affairs was the élite's affinity to the French language (recall Voltaire's sarcastic remark that in Potsdam German was used only towards horses). In this sense there was no national

language, because large parts of the power élite refused to treat Germany as such. This is what Myers-Scotton (1990: 25), referring to post-colonial patterns of language choice in African states, calls 'élite closure', an attitude she defines as 'a strategy by which those persons in power maintain their powers and privileges via language choices'. In Germany élite closure stood in the way of the nation-state. This is one reason why language became a critically important item in the ideological tool-box of nation-building in the nineteenth century. Overcoming élite closure by establishing a common language that ensured communication across all social strata was one way of creating a kind of unity and identity that superseded the personal allegiances of feudal social structure. Such unity and sense of belonging had been achieved, in some cases, by focusing on other features: a common patrimony, history, culture, and political idea. In Germany, however, because of its history of political fragmentation, the notion that it was in some sense natural for linguistic attachment and political allegiance to coincide became particularly important.

Meinecke's well-known distinction between *Kulturnation* and *Staatsnation* comes to bear here. A *Staatsnation* in his definition is one 'based on the unifying power of a common political history and constitution' (Meinecke 1962: 10). Germany lacked both the tradition of political unity which had moulded the French nation and the voluntaristic element of a new constitution which had created the American. Hence, in the German context the most promising path open to nation-building, as a reaction first to French cultural domination and later to military occupation, was that of a *Kulturnation*, one based on a common cultural heritage (ibid.). To this end the language was an indispensable tool. Although the process of linguistic unification, which had been given a focus and pushed forward by the Reformation, was hardly complete at the time of the French Revolution, the German language was more likely than any other social feature to lend itself to the creation of a national myth which could serve as a catalyst of 'sentimental attachment toward the nation'.

3 THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE AS AN ECONOMIC NECESSITY

What about Kelman's second source of legitimacy, the instrumental attachment toward the nation? As mentioned above, this has to do with material benefits the population derives from belonging to a national system. In what sense can a national system meet the material needs of a population better than, say, a feudal fief or a largely self-sufficient rural community? In a subsistence economy there is no

obvious answer to this question. Only where production is for a market rather than for consumption are there obvious benefits to be derived from belonging to a national system, a national market, that is. As I have argued elsewhere in some detail (Coulmas 1993), language and trade or, more generally, language and economic activity are intimately linked with each other (see also Ammon, this volume). Whenever there is trade, there is communication, and the more extensive the trade, the wider the range of the language that serves to mediate it. While there are exceptions to this rule, it is a general tendency for which Europe's transformation from feudalistic agrarian self-sufficiency to industrial capitalism provides several examples.

Deutsch (1953) convincingly analysed nineteenth-century European nationalism in terms of communication theory, as a response, that is, to the need for more extensive and more tightly knit networks of social communication. The surge of linguistic nationalism can thus be understood as an economic necessity. This point has also been made by Gellner (1983), who sees nationalism primarily as a by-product of socio-economic developments rather than an ideological outgrowth of Romanticism or the French Revolution. Like Deutsch, he highlights the role of communication, while at the same time stressing the importance of industrialization. In modern industrial society, he maintains, for the first time in human history, explicit and reasonably precise communication becomes generally, pervasively used and important (Gellner 1983: 33).

For this kind of communication a standard language is needed, where dialects and social variation are sufficiently levelled not to obstruct mutual understanding across larger regions and social strata. It is important, therefore, that such a language is used universally by all members of the society and in all functional domains, including those formerly reserved to the 'prestige language' (Kahane 1986). Thus social communication had to be reorientated from primarily horizontal directions — the élite throughout Europe conversed in French — to include more vertical patterns creating a greater sense of civility and common belongingness up and down the social hierarchy.

Industrial production requires standardized and orderly procedures, as well as a mobile, homogeneous, and more highly educated population. These requirements imply the need for using a single standard language to reach all members of society who are drawn into the economic process. It is thus in the wake of the emergence of national economies worthy of that name that national languages come into existence. A national language in this sense is a standardized common language used by a large majority of the population. By affording its speakers access to the national market, including the labour market,

the national language helps to increase the population's instrumental attachment towards the national system. Accordingly, one aspect of the national language is that it is the language of the national economy, including in particular the national labour market.

4 THE SUCCESS OF LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM

Linguistic nationalism in Germany has often been explained as a reaction to French supremacy. The common adversary, so the argument goes, triggered an ideology which emphasized the commonality of the many German states. Clearly, the Revolutionary wars were conducive to any intellectual current with anti-French overtones. It seems questionable, however, whether this could have been enough to sweep away the thoroughly cosmopolitan orientation of German intellectuals during the age of Enlightenment. Goethe, according to his secretary (Eckermann, 31 January 1827), held that *national* literature did not mean much because the epoch of *world* literature had arrived, and Schiller (n.d.: 429) stated with grand emotionalism: 'Early on I lost my fatherland, to exchange it for the wide world.' Such sentiments, one would imagine, could be silenced by war for a while, but hardly eliminated from public discourse altogether. A more credible explanation of the success of nationalism, linguistic or otherwise, is to be found in the socio-economic needs first on the social level, to break down élite closure, and secondly on the economic level, to establish a means of communication suitable for integrating a national market. Of course, these were not the motives of the proponents of linguistic nationalism in Germany, but the case can be made that it was thanks to these objective needs that the ideology of linguistic nationalism caught on and was able to ignite more than a flash in the pan of momentary enthusiasm.

Ironically, the Enlightenment had in a sense paved the way for linguistic nationalism, because for the liberating power of knowledge to be released beyond the educated élite it was essential that it be expressed in the vernacular language. However, while for the universalistic purposes of the Enlightenment any language was suitable as long as it was sufficiently elaborate to express the ideas that needed to be expressed (Coulmas 1989a), linguistic nationalism had to stress the particular qualities of one language distinguishing it from all others. It was Herder's Romantic notion of *Volksgeist* (national spirit) which provided the intellectual foundation for such claims to singularity. A language, in his view, incorporates a national spirit, preserving, as it does, a link with the past since time immemorial and hence

with the mythical roots of a nation. Thus, although the vernacular as opposed to the prestige language was assigned a crucial role by both the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the ways in which it was instrumentalized were quite different. The Enlightenment enlisted the vernaculars to gain access to the realm of knowledge, emphasizing their instrumental qualities, their openness and universal expressive power. Romanticism, by contrast, treated these same languages as unique manifestations of national identities, emphasizing their sentimental qualities, their closedness and parochial peculiarity.

Ever since, both of these orientations have been part of the ideological baggage attached to the German language (as well as many other European standard languages), at times receding into the background to re-emerge later in somewhat modified forms. The above-mentioned socio-economic developments which were conducive to the establishment of standard German as a common language with nation-wide validity pertain to the instrumental qualities of the language. Linguistic nationalism, however, was all about its sentimental qualities. To put it in sociological terms, linguistic nationalism emphasized language as a medium of creating *Gemeinschaft* (community), while socio-economic developments at the same time required the language to take on qualities making it a suitable medium for creating *Gesellschaft* (society). Although this seems paradoxical, it may have been just this contradiction that caught the imagination and made many embrace linguistic nationalism. Through its look backward in search of imaginary roots and its emphasis on uniqueness, authenticity, heritage, and intimacy, the ideology provided an antidote to the threatening horrors of modernity, uprootedness, anonymity, and arbitrary replaceability.

5 FROM AUTHENTICITY TO PREJUDICE

Linguistic nationalism in Germany took on different faces. Herder had no political designs, nor was his idea of a national spirit enshrined in a national language accompanied by an intent to put one language above others. He thought that a multiplicity of distinct and authentic languages could best give expression to the multi-facetedness of humanity. It is not without reason, therefore, that the father of linguistic nationalism is sometimes celebrated as a champion of linguistic pluralism (Fishman 1985).

However, others less tolerantly inclined erected an edifice of militant nationalism on the foundations Herder had laid. In his *Addresses to the German Nation* Johann Gottlieb Fichte, a major proponent of

German idealism, first gave philosophical authority to the claim of the identity of nation, state and language: 'It is incontestably true that, wherever a particular language is found, a separate nation exists which is entitled independently to take charge of its own affairs and govern itself' (Fichte 1808, 12th Address).

Proclaimed in French-occupied Berlin, this proved to be a powerful concept. But Fichte was not content merely to establish a link between language and national self-determination. Like other nationalists after him (see Fishman 1972 for examples), he insisted that the language of his choice was superior to others. In the face of the high prestige and obvious refinement of French, this was not an easy point to argue, but Fichte's solution was to draw a distinction between 'living' and 'dead' languages. 'A living language,' he wrote, 'if compared with another one, can well be highly cultivated, but it can never in itself achieve the same perfection and formation that a dead language so easily obtains' (Fichte 1808). Living languages were those with an unbroken and 'pure' tradition, such as German. Dead languages, on the other hand, were languages with mixed and broken-off traditions like Latin-Celtic French or English. True, German was not as polished as French, but then it was not degenerate either. Such ideological acrobatics allowed Fichte to turn vice into virtue: German was not only distinct from other languages, but alive and more authentic, incorporating, as it did, the spirit of the *Urvolk*. The Germans, he said, speak 'a language which is shaped to express the truth' (*ibid.*).

That languages are different only makes a difference if there is a significant connection between language and thought, especially if one language is better equipped than others to 'express the truth' or, in more relativistic terms, if different languages express different truths. It was Wilhelm von Humboldt who took it upon himself to provide this idea with some philosophical credibility (see also Dittmar, in this volume). A key notion in his linguistic thinking is that of the 'genius' or 'character' of a language. Although Humboldt's work testifies to the same *Zeitgeist* as Fichte's, it is to his credit that he submitted the question of the differences between languages and their relationship with nations to systematic investigation. He carried further Herder's notion of the inseparability of language and thought, and thus also came to the conclusion that differences between languages involve differences in the understanding and interpretation of the world.

Language for Humboldt was a medium that unites individuals while separating groups. These groups are nations. They cannot be thought of without languages and vice versa, since 'our historiography nowhere justifies the assumption that a nation ever existed prior to its language'

(Humboldt 1823/1963: 69). Hence, 'the concept of a nation must be based especially upon language . . . Language by its own force proclaims the national character' (1830/1963: 561).

Rather than being at the origin of national identity, linguistic differentiation and language formation are often an outgrowth of national will (consider, for example, Dutch vs. German, Croatian vs. Serbian, Czech vs. Slovak, Hindi vs. Urdu). But in spite of this obvious problem, the notion of the identity of language and nation was an attractive point of reference for many nationalists who wanted to exploit language for their own purposes. During the nineteenth century the German language, along with many others, was glorified as a national monument. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm planned to offer their encyclopaedic historical dictionary 'with joy and pride on the altar of the fatherland'. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1 provoked a wave of linguistic purism (the linguistic equivalent of xenophobia and racism), and the First World War saw the publication of many patriotic works about the German language, such as Eduard Engel's *Sprich Deutsch! Zum Hilfsdienst am Vaterland* (1916). By this time, notwithstanding the existence of several predominantly German-speaking states, the German language had become a firm component of Germany's 'national identity'.

6 RACE VS. LANGUAGE

Enter the movement of National Socialism. It might be expected that linguistic nationalism would have accorded well with the Nazis' expansionist pleas on behalf of a *Volk ohne Raum* (a people without space) and their call of *heim ins Reich!* addressed to Austrians and German minorities in eastern Europe. As a matter of fact it did not. While Italian irredentism used language as the focal point of its legitimacy, the Nazi ideology assigned language a decidedly secondary role. Language, after all, can be acquired; race, as understood by the Nazis, cannot. Considering the fact that conquered peoples have often adopted their conquerors' language, Hitler contemplated:

Since nationhood, or rather race, lies not in language but in the blood, one can speak of Germanization only if and when the blood of the subdued had been transformed. This, however, is impossible even if the resulting mixed product were to speak the language of the formerly superior race a thousand times (Hitler 1939: 428-9).

Hitler also realized that the concept of nationality based on language would force him to accept as Germans many whom he despised and intended to exterminate: 'Clearly, no one would dream of recog-

nizing the purely superficial fact that many of the lice-infested exodus from the east speak German as proof of their patrimony and peoplehood' (ibid. 430).

For a *Volk* whose identity is rooted in *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) language is too fickle and intangible a feature to serve as a reliable criterion of belonging. Language does not preclude a subjective, voluntaristic affiliation with a nation as a 'plébiscite de tous les jours', to quote Renan's (1882) influential definition. Indeed, linguistic nationalism would have saved millions had it been the ideology of the Third Reich, for most of those who perished in the gas chambers spoke German.

7 DIVISION OF STATE AND LANGUAGE

After the fall of the Third Reich it became evident that the essence of linguistic nationalism had survived intact. Fichte's idea of a natural identity of language, nation, and state was deeply ingrained and influenced even linguists in their dealings with language. This time, however, it was turned on its head. As a result of the lost war, Germany's integrity as a political entity was destroyed. As of 1949, the identity of language, nation, and state plainly ceased to exist. Switzerland and Austria had always been special cases, but the creation of two states on German territory was irreconcilable with the idea of the nation-state with its national language. 'A former country in central Europe' is what the 1966 edition of the *Random House Dictionary* stated under 'Germany'. Political integrity can be suspended by force and quickly, but what about the language?

As a reaction to Germany's division many linguists and journalists concluded that a split in the language would inevitably follow the establishment of two separate states. After all, a state had to have its national language. Just as if they were hunting for inside scoops instead of taking time to investigate the facts, and just as if languages were objects that can change virtually overnight, some professional observers of the German language started publishing articles about West German and East German barely a decade after the two German states had been founded (for a critical appraisal of such writings, see Schlosser 1981). This may have been the result of an authoritarian tradition of respect for the state which, somewhat perversely, turned the original historical idea that a speech community was entitled to political self-determination around to imply that political autonomy would bring about linguistic autonomy.

This idea also had a role to play in the Cold War. The communist

dictatorship tirelessly tried to secure as many of the traditional paraphernalia of the nation-state as it could, since it was denied recognition in the Western world as a respectable state. That the socialist nation of German workers and peasants should have its own language was a clearly stated policy aim which trickled down to dictionary definitions by obliging lexicographers. At the same time claims were laid, much in keeping with the authenticity maxim of linguistic nationalism, to the linguistic heritage, or at least to the good parts of it. To quote but one example, Walter Ulbricht, who dominated GDR politics for two decades, declared: 'There is a big difference between the traditional German language of Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Marx, and Engels, which is replete with humanism, and the language as it is used in certain circles of the West German Federal Republic, which is defiled by the spirit of imperialism' (Ulbricht 1970).

This proclamation, and many similar ones, rang rather hollow, not least because public discourse in the GDR right down to its very end was a close cognate, if not the unbroken continuation, of Nazi-speak. As Schlosser (1991: 15) has pointed out, the leadership of the GDR in their official publications appealed to the collective solidarity of the *Volk* and, in spite of the obvious ideological differences, their linguistic self-representation was shockingly similar to that of the Third Reich. The *Volksgerichtshof* had just ceased to execute its terror justice, when the first *Volksrichter* (People's judges) were installed in the Soviet-occupied zone; the *Volkssturm*, Hitler's last-ditch stand, had been dismantled only a few years before, when the GDR created its *Volksarmee*. Countless other new institutions were adorned with names that made reference to the *Volk*, having been taken, one might be led to think, straight out of the dictionary of the *Völkischer Beobachter* (the National Socialists' newspaper). Proletarians went to work in *Volkseigene Betriebe*; the legislative body of the GDR was called *Volkskammer*, the police force *Volkspolizei*, and the entire polity was a *Volksdemokratie*. That *Volk* was a key term of Nazi ideology did not prevent the communists from appealing to the *Volk* in their attempt to provide the new state with some kind of legitimacy. Although most of the population did not actively support the regime, the constant calls for collective solidarity and reference to East Germans as the *Volk* of the GDR did not remain without effect. This became appallingly obvious when the East German population was finally able to cast off the yoke of their repressive regime. The war-cry resounding through the streets of East German cities as an apotheosis of the downfall of the communist government, 'Wir sind das Volk' (we are the people), later slightly but significantly modified to 'Wir sind ein Volk' (we are one people), took many West Germans by surprise, because they were no longer used to thinking of themselves

and referring to themselves as a or the *Volk*. Arguably, the West German collectivity, thanks partly at least to American re-education programmes after the war, were much less of a *Volk*. In fact, *Volk* was discarded from public discourse west of the demarcation line. Even the *Volkswagen* was coyly transmuted into a *VW*.

In this sense there really was a certain difference in the language use of East and West. Other lexical items could be cited in support of this claim, especially words susceptible to ideological loading, many of which were defined in East German dictionaries in a way acceptable to the communist masters of meaning. However, to conclude on the basis of some diverging connotations and even outright semantic differences that the German language was in the process of splitting into two was merely an absurd misunderstanding of linguistic variation (see Barbour and Stevenson 1990: 174-9) coupled with the uncritical acceptance of the dogmas of linguistic nationalism in reverse.

8 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As the twentieth century draws to a close, the 'German question' is once again on the agenda, and once again many commentators, Germans and others, are concerned with the question of what constitutes 'Germanness'. In this short chapter we have concentrated on one aspect of German identity which is relevant to this book, the German language.

As a catalyst of nationalism, the German language fulfilled in the past a variety of functions, three of which were particularly significant. First, on the economic level linguistic nationalism coincided roughly with industrialization and, as has been argued, was a necessary by-product of this process. The national market required a national language, and its promotion became a matter of economic necessity. Increasing vertical and horizontal communication in a more mobile society called for a higher level of standardization in many domains of social life, notably in language. Thus, secondly, on the social level, unifying the nation linguistically was a means of breaking down elite closure and softening social class barriers. Finally, on the political level language was recruited as a symbolic boundary marker, which provided the rationale for a claim to self-determination. Language was an easily recognized feature for distinguishing 'us' from 'them'.

A number of influential concepts have been reviewed on the preceding pages (Herder's *Volksgeist*, Fichte's *Urvolk*, and Humboldt's *Nationalcharakter der Sprachen*), and I have shown how these notions, despite fundamental differences in the intellectual orientations of their

authors, combined to single out language as the key element of national distinctiveness in the German tradition since Romanticism. For historical reasons, other issues around which nationalism centred in nineteenth-century Europe, such as territory, political institutions, or religion, were less suitable for developing an ideology of national individuality in the German context. But that the German language was an expression of the profound depth of the German mind was an idea that inspired many.

Yet language is not a 'natural' vehicle for nationalism: nationalists have usurped language only when it suited their purposes. During the most excessive period of German nationalism the German language was relegated to a subordinate role in the ideological system, because the Nazis stressed primordial ties rooted in the fictitious concept of an eternal and unalterable (superior) race, which is hereditary rather than acquired.

After the War, I have argued, linguistic nationalism resurfaced in Germany in a very implicit and domesticated form. Barely a decade after two states had been founded on German territory, linguists began to look for the inevitable division of German into two distinct national languages: inevitable, that is, according to the doctrine of linguistic nationalism which postulates the identity of nation, state, and language. In the wake of the disintegration of the East German state, these concerns were quickly deposited in their proper place, in the waste basket of history. Which brings us to the present.

While these lines were being prepared for printing, Germany has been going through a critical period of self-assessment, rethinking its place in the world. Emotional discussions about who belongs to German society and who does not remain the order of the day. Nationalist sentiments have come to the fore in a most unpalatable way. This is not the place (or the author) to make predictions about the outcome of these developments. However, the observations put forward in this chapter suggest that at a time when the Germans are once again preoccupied with defining boundaries between 'us' and 'them', it would be useful and prudent to keep a watchful eye on what intellectuals and the mass media have to say about the national language and the spirit it enshrines.

Further Reading

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- Kohn (1960)
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