
Some ideas about multilingualism and national identity

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In this paper I argue that linguistic diversity is one of the most common characteristics of human history, so much so that it could be considered a “natural” characteristic of humanity (Skutnab-Kangas, Maffi, & Harmon, 2003). Linguistic diversity combines with interaction among human groups and, in this combination, is produced bilingualism (I use this term as a shorthand for multiple language skill) and other modes of communicating across our differences. Bilingualism, understood here as functioning in more than one language, in which many individuals and most groups use more than one linguistic code for communication, is usually organised purposively. This means that communication skills are differentiated according to purpose, function, or interlocutor. This combination of multiple languages meshed with diverse purposes makes for a very complex pattern of language capabilities and usage.

Keywords: *bilingualism; identity; multilingualism; society*

Introduction

The “widening, deepening and speeding up of world wide interconnectedness” (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999, p. 2) of the contemporary world, prompted most clearly by economic globalisation, stimulates population mobility. The movement of peoples is also linked to information and communication technologies, and both produce instantaneous connections and dispersed affiliations across great distances. This is the compelling thesis of the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells with his *Information Age* trilogy of publications in the mid to late 1990s documenting the connections between movement, populations, and, though not central to his thesis, linguistic pluralism. His “network society” notion extends the place-specific nature of most languages beyond the spatial origins of all human languages, creating the new locus of languages in networks facilitated by digital means disciplined by persisting human practical needs (Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2004).

It is instructive that in this context of galloping pluralism most public policies stress the communication challenges of the resulting multilingualism rather than the characteristic of communication diversity. As a result, some kinds of bilingualism have come to be regarded as strong and socially additive and are materially rewarded, while other kinds of bilingualism have become fragile, unstable, and fading. The kind of bilingualism which has become strong in public discourse in many countries, and attractive to learners and policy makers, tends to involve the addition of instrumentally useful languages; especially, but not only, English, to the uncontested national languages of secure national states (EC, 2006; Mejia, 2002).

The term *additive bilingualism* is sometimes used to describe this kind of bilingualism, in which an individual or a community invest, both psychologically and materially, in gaining skills and using an additional language while retaining a secure role and permanent presence of their original or own native language. Some examples are the learning of English by Brazilians, Japanese, Chinese, or Dutch nationals; the learning of French by English-speaking Canadians; or the learning of Chinese, Italian, or Japanese by Australians.

By contrast, the type of bilingualism that has been rendered unstable is that of minority populations, including the languages of sub-national communities in the above-mentioned states, such as non-Han populations in China, indigenous peoples in Brazil, Australia, the United States, and elsewhere (Diamond, 2001). The term we can use for this kind of bilingualism is *subtractive*, meaning that the second or acquired language often comes to dominate the learners' original or native language. Immigrants to Australia, Canada, or France acquire the national languages of those countries but, over time, lose their original language. Indigenous populations can also shift to the use of a dominant language, whether the main language of their national community or a regional language, but in this process their original language loses its hold on their personal and social life.

Bilingualism is therefore temporary—a transitional phase between one communicative state (whether it was monolingual or bilingual) and its replacement by another communicative condition: usually the monolingual use of the dominant, acquired, new language (Lo Bianco, 2009).

Language diversity is therefore a term that captures very different sociolinguistic realities; more diverse than even the ones

I refer to here. In these realities there are often trends and patterns that are radically different from what applies in other settings, because patterns of language use are influenced by the specific histories that apply in different contexts, and because language use reflects a very complex mixture of identity and practical material reality. Language is therefore both symbolic (it symbolises our attachments, our sense of our selves, what kinds of belonging we wish to invoke and display) and at the same time responds to the practical conditions with which we are surrounded, where some languages offer more practical benefits than others. These languages are used in education, the media, business and commerce, international contexts, and so on, and therefore have more rewards and more power than other languages. There are some generalisations we can make, many things we can learn, and some experiences we can transport from one setting to another, but we must also be careful not to assume that too much can be carried from one setting to another and expect that identical circumstances, possibilities, or problems will apply (Lo Bianco, forthcoming).

Subtractive language diversity is typically the bilingualism of small, dispersed, or mobile communities of colonised peoples and of marginalised populations. Subtractive language diversity and situations of language loss across generations (*intergenerational language shift*) are often studied by professionals interested in the possibility of what is increasingly called *reversing language shift* (Fishman, 2001).

Three kinds of work

Language shift is the result of processes of colonisation, arrested development for some languages, and, ultimately, inequality in the social, economic, and technological supports for some languages. Damaging language diversity and reducing the number of active, healthy human languages has involved the most important processes of human change over long periods of time. To have any chance of reversing the language shift that history has produced, three kinds of work are required: ideological work, social work, and linguistic work.

I want to claim that we need to undertake these three kinds of work simultaneously, to reverse or at least stall the erosion of language diversity and to substitute additive for subtractive bilingualism for marginalised, poor, oppressed, or isolated communities. To make more and more languages healthy, it is

crucial to make more and more communities healthy; we will need to create the right conditions, and this will require ideological work, social work, and linguistic work.

In this section I discuss the history that has produced a major weakening of the linguistic diversity of the world and apply the principles from the first part of the paper to the specifically Australian experience: one of the most dramatic, important, and desperate in the world.

The red book and the national state

In the early 1990s the United Nations, through its specialised agency dealing with education, science, and culture, UNESCO, became alarmed and sought to make others alarmed about language extinction and subtractive bilingualism. Its alarm took the form of a *Red Book*, which noted that professional linguists had calculated that up to 90% of the world's approximately 6,700 languages were threatened with extinction within a few generations and called on world leaders to take drastic action to protect minority language communities.

Subtractive language diversity—or the failure to retain original languages in active use as individuals and groups acquire dominant languages—can lead to language loss for individuals, groups, or whole communities. For individuals, language loss happens when they are the only ones to abandon their first language and instead use only the newly acquired language. For groups, it happens when a specific group of speakers replaces its original language with another language, but other groups remain who speak the same original language. This occurs mostly to immigrants who move from a homeland where that language is dominant or secure, to another country where that language is marginal. Even though there is language loss for that community of speakers, the language itself is not endangered. Here we see the distinction between a homeland and a diaspora. The third and most extreme kind of subtractive bilingualism, leading to the extinction of minority languages, occurs when the entire community of speakers of a given language shifts to using the new, replacing language exclusively (Diamond, 2001).

The national state is the key social structure which has accelerated and, in many instances, produced these processes of profound language change, known as *language intergenerational language shift and language extinction* (Fishman, 2001).

The first kind of shift occurs when scattered individuals, or small groups, cease to use one language and transfer to using another. This affects those individuals and the proportion of the total use of that language which they represent. The second kind of shift occurs when whole organic units of speakers of a dispersed language cease to use that language and transfer to using a replacement code. The communicative effect is on those communities alone and the proportion of the total use of that language which they represent. The third mode of shift occurs when the total speaker population of a language ceases to use that language and transfers its communicative efforts to one or more other languages. The communicative effect in these extreme cases rebounds not only on those communities but on the total use of that language, and therefore its very existence. This is when language extinction occurs.

In my view, the critical context and instrument via which most, perhaps not all, language shift occurs, and certainly the agentive structure most relevant to the Australian context, is the *national state* (Lo Bianco, 2005). The national state is a form of political organisation, a way to manage and administer geographic and political territory (geopolitical space), and is characterised by one crucial feature that makes it relevant for language ecology: the expectation that there should be a symmetrical correspondence between the cultural characteristics of the residents who constitute a state and the structures of authority of that state. This critical point will become clearer later, when I explicate what is not a national state.

Before the National State

Before the formation and emergence of national states, which is an historically recent occurrence for the most part (though it does have ancient roots), most states, and most European states, will be called here *prenational*.

The European case is of course essential to understanding most of the new world settings of language shift, because the vast expansion of European colonial rule—the creation of the so called new world—relied on a model of statehood that came from the European experience (Wright, 2000). One way to think of the prenational state is to think of feudalism, in which rulers were either church hierarchies or local lords loyal to distant monarchs. Both cases, dynastic monarchs and ecclesiastical authorities, were extranational; that is, they tended to be located far away or be

linked by family and faith across great distances. As a result, the rulers and the ruled tended to be linked together by faith or economy in a hierarchically organised relationship (Hastings, 1997). The rulers mostly wanted the ruled only to pay their taxes, foment no trouble, be available for military service, and uphold the faith. Other than these requirements, the local cultural, and therefore linguistic, life of communities was of little interest to rulers.

The rulers of prenational states did not seek to “bond” with their subjects; the status of citizen only arose later. The ruled were for the most part subjects, residents, or denizens of states that took little actual interest in their lives. Many prenational states in Europe, therefore, were highly linguistically diverse. Europe is where the bulk of this story arises, where the critical formation of the national state happens earliest and takes deepest root, and from where it is exported most widely (Greenfeld, 1992). From this process of export, the national state has come to be regarded, in a virtually unremarked way, as the only way in which geopolitical space is divided, constituted, and governed.

The ruled therefore could and did make local bonds, of language, identity, and culture. The governing ideologies of the states were religious and dynastic. The ruled were required to adhere to the strict ways in which the extra-local, or supra-national, church required faith to be demonstrated, and to display political loyalty to transnational dynastic and imperial houses (Hobsbawm, 1992). This unique combination of local feudalism and transnational cultural elites we mostly recall for its poverty and degradation, but it was also a time of flourishing linguistic diversity.

Transnationally, the language of communication was an elite form of a dynastic language, most commonly Latin (Ostler, 2007). This common transnational language allowed medieval universities to flourish, and the immense spaces of the European landmass to be collectively governed by combinations of canon law and dynastic rule. Some scholars have called this period a *Republic of Letters* (McNeely & Wolverson, 2008) because elites could communicate and forge bonds of identity across what are today a vast number of relatively small independent, autonomous political states.

Inventing nations and states

Over a long period of time, and in different ways at different times and places, the vast territories governed in more or less this way ceded to a new kind of governance, the national state. I will mention only critical points of many that are possible. First Dante,

second Herder, and third the Jacobins. Dante Alighieri was Italy's pre-eminent poet, writing in the early 14th century, and he can be cited as the originator of the European movement for the vernacular (see Lo Bianco, 2005 for an extended discussion).

Dante wanted to devise a distinctive and missing language, Italian, with the express purpose of organising the political territory people called Italy, but which, lacking a unifying language and symbol of collective identity, was composed instead of many disparate small states. Because these states were small and feuding with each other, they were subject to continual external invasion and occupation from states that were militarily more powerful. In an important work, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, written 1303-1305, Dante theorised on language planning and proposed a method for inventing this new language and for encouraging its learning and use. He then wrote his major work, the *Divine Comedy*, in that language, establishing it as an authoritative and admired linguistic form.

Dante's dream that a distinctive language would produce a distinctive and independent state was not accomplished for about 550 years (depending on how and what we count) after he imagined it, but his theorisation of the vernacular and its role in forging a sense of national identity, linked to the practice of engineering its creation, were decisive in both the Italian and wider European project of inventing the nation. This *nation* idea was built on the foundation of linguistic forms.

A later, but crucially important, phase we owe to Gottfried Herder; an 18th-century German romantic philosopher, living much later than the Florentine poet. Herder was reacting against the science, empiricism, and positivism of the Enlightenment philosophers (Hobsbawm, 1992) in his own country (though Germany as we know it today did not exist, and its birth was not unrelated to Herder's ideas). In response to the Enlightenment thinkers' science of society, and especially those travelling in India and noticing that Sanskrit had nonrandom connections to Latin and ancient Greek, Herder argued instead for languages and identity. The links between the ancient languages of India and Europe, Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek, led many thinkers to stress what made humans similar—what we share despite surface differences, and what were underlying shared characteristics—using this wider overarching linguistic unity to postulate common culture and identity.

But for Herder, what makes Germans uniquely, essentially German, was their use of the German language. German was the

spirit language of German peoplehood and identity; what it shared with other languages, whether European or north Indian, could not detract from its unique status as the definer of a German essence. Herder extends this claim to other language communities and makes a decisive contribution to the idea, and the ideal, that we are defined by and through language and its characteristic uses, imagining language as a definer of the unique cultural characteristics of peoples.

The Jacobins add an explosive element to this mixture of concepts. In the dramatic reconstruction of dynastic society unleashed in revolutionary France at the end of the 18th century, the Jacobin revolutionaries argue that a state must offer equality to its people. *The people* are not to be subjects of dynastic rule, of a monarch, but citizens of a republic in which they are equal and fraternal, and being citizens requires access to the same language. Today, many of us would call what the Jacobins were arguing for “sameness,” and this would carry a negative connotation, but it was a truly revolutionary notion at the end of the 18th century in a Europe where prenational states dominated and the idea of equality ignited rebellion against old order.

This notion of equality through sameness was predicated not only on speaking the same language, but the same prestige educated variety of language—essentially literate standard Parisian French—inaugurating state monolingualism (Greenfeld, 1992; Wright, 2000). In the specific case of revolutionary France, this took the form of a specific campaign to stamp out dialects which were considered vestiges of feudalism that kept their speakers trapped in ignorance and local identities.

This reached further depth with the industrial revolution and the invention of schools (or rather of schooling) as education, or training, in mass and compulsory unilingual literacy. Herder, and other philosophers and romantics like him, say that we belong through speaking the same language: that we should form political entities with those whom we belong culturally. The Jacobins and other implementers of the republican revolutionary ideals say that we gain identity as equal citizens of a republican state. This new identity should incorporate the entire population and eradicate difference, because difference means inequality. Here the rulers and ruled become the same, politically as well as culturally. The distinctive contours of the national state become more clearly etched. The industrial revolution, and some of the associated democratic reforms, incorporated entire populations into

compulsory schooling aiming to make everyone literate, and this entrenched a hierarchy of linguistic forms through what was mass, schooled, obligatory literacy. Herder invented a cultural community, the Jacobins a political community, industrialism added a literate economic community.

This, so far, would be an important and interesting *European story*, but it becomes an important and interesting *world story* because the Europeans spread the nation state idea through imperial expansion and colonial adventure. This is not to deny that in some, perhaps many, of the places they planted these ideas that there were not emergent or even developed notions of language as a marker of distinctiveness. Indeed Japan and Korea look a lot like the monolingual story invoked in Europe (Carroll, 2001). For the most part these were pre-industrial formations, similar to the pre-industrial, premodern equivalents of local identities that existed in some parts of Europe, too. The association of monolingual nationality and statehood, the invention of the national state, its association with modernity, and republican citizenship, received its massive boost in the crucible of European nationalism. Even in states that did not become formally republican, such as Britain, the processes of limiting the monarchy took very similar pathways to those identified and produced in the national-state republics of 19th-century Europe (Greenfeld, 1992). These republics then exported, and imposed, ideologies of unilingual nationalism on a massive scale across the world.

It is no accident, then, that when we look at the distribution of spoken languages today, according to the Ethnologue database (Lewis, 2009), only about 3% of the world's language diversity that is not from recent immigration is in Europe. This is a lower percentage than Papua New Guinea alone. This statistic conveys the force of monolingual state making. The European nations had the earliest and deepest effects of the idea of making citizens, and making them equal and the same, through common singular national languages.

The Postnational State?

In recent decades, the process of economic globalisation has led some scholars to boldly predict the extinction of the nation state. Although it is true that globalisation is producing some social, economic, and cultural conditions that resemble the prenatal state, it is too early to predict its demise. It is certainly true, however, that there is a decline in the exercise of exclusive national

sovereignty (Giddens, 1999). It is also true that something like a postnational state is emerging, if we are clear that we mean the decline of the autonomous, bounded, romantic, and controlling national state. In any case, the tendency is clear (Castells, 2004; Held et al., 1999). Transnational capitalism is accompanied worldwide by burgeoning extranational identities and, ironically enough, most strongly and deeply in Europe, with the emergence there of the European Union, a supranational and nation challenging polity.

Citizenship itself, that legal instrument for attaching disparate peoples to the same state, is an excellent demonstration of how deeply these changes seek to go. Despite the ideals of the revolutionaries that all would be equal in the new republican dispensation, segmented membership of political communities has always existed. Formal citizenship is the only social role (potentially) shared by all adults, while de facto has classically been segmented by property, age, sex, birthplace and language. Major forms of exclusion from membership in the political community have always existed and these have meant that the espoused ideals of the nation-makers have always fallen short of realities. Language has been a crucial form of exclusion, and today, under conditions that erode the exclusive hold of the national state, we see how the expansion of English worldwide and the greater complexity of public life have raised the barriers for citizenship participation.

Today we can identify many flows of population, products, ideas, knowledge, cultural forms, and identities, all facilitated by instantaneous and relatively widely available communications technologies, but also migration, student mobility, and politics of resistance against national homogenisation. Together these show signs of restoring some of the prenational state conditions of local linguistic diversity, or rather of a scrambling of the association of exclusive sameness between rulers and ruled in cultural terms. So, we have three kinds of work: reversing language shift, the *Red Book*, and the postnational state.

Globalisation and English

In some ways global English is tantamount to what we mean by the very process of globalisation itself: the expansion across the whole globe of single systems of life that originate in specific localities. The expansion of English arose from a unique historical contingency; the fact that, for the first and only time in history, a transfer of power from one hegemonic regime to another was

effected within the same language. This occurred of course after the Second World War when with the decline in British imperial reach and its transfer to American economic and military muscle. The link between languages of teaching and learning and social, economic, and military conditions is evident in the analysis by Yun Kyung Cha and Seung Hwan Ham (2008), who compare the choice of first foreign language (FFL) in the curricula of primary and secondary schools across the world over the past 155 years. Their data are like a barometer testing the atmospheric temperature of the world as revealed by the acquisition of the languages of dominant powers, revealing dramatic and rapid redistribution of the languages learned for communicating beyond national frontiers. They divide the period 1850-2005 into seven phases, and for each of these contrast the presence of five “European” languages (English, French, German, Russian, and Spanish) as FFL in education systems. The number of countries represented in the survey grows from 15 and 12 for the primary and secondary levels in the 1850–1874 phase, to 151 and 154 for primary and secondary respectively in 1990–2005 phase.

Initially foreign language teaching was confined to secondary schools, with German dominant, French prominent, and English marginal, with Spanish and Russian missing altogether. World events meant that German lost its place mainly to French, but also to English; English then took the enrolments devoted to French; after the Cold War, Russian had a temporary emergence, especially during the Cold War, but lost its presence to English, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Spanish might figure very prominently in the United States, but its presence worldwide is minuscule compared to English, and indeed in Asia, where English counts in all cases as the first foreign language. It is not surprising, in light of these figures, that Graddol (2006) identifies English as possibly being spoken, learned, or known by up to half the world’s population at some stage in the near future. In this context, it is notable that English comes to serve not so much as a foreign language at all, but as a basic skill. Nor is it surprising, therefore, that knowing English comes to represent a factor in its own right in the social and political distribution of bilingualism, whether subtractive or additive in the world today.

Distribution of bilingualism

The European Union has collected statistics called the Euro-Barometer for many years which considers diverse aspects of social

life in EU member states. Combining the data from these figures (see Lo Bianco, 2001, 2009), the pattern of bilingual distribution appears to be, broadly speaking, as follows, according to states, societies, and individuals:

- *States*: Bilingualism increases in smaller states located near larger and more powerful states, and in non-English-dominant states over English-dominant states.
- *Societies*: Bilingualism increases if the society is not subject to the unilingual modernity ideology that was generated in European-national-state formation, as argued earlier. The strongest case would be India, where national belonging is less dependent on distinctive monolingualism than in other states, though this is not to overlook language conflicts that are experienced in India, too.
- *Individuals and groups*: Bilingualism increases when an individual's occupation rewards learning an additional language, such as we see in the Euro-Barometer studies (see Table 1), and when the retention of the minority language accords with the core values of a particular group. This core values thesis explains why some immigrant groups are more attached to passing on their ancestral language intergenerationally than other groups. The literature (Fishman, 2001) also has examples of groups struggling against repression which is directed at their distinctive language are in some cases more attached to its maintenance.

The picture of the distribution of bilingualism is therefore very complex. The Euro-Barometer studies show a very interesting detailed pattern (see Table 1).

The Eurobarometer is a regular data gathering exercise of various aspects of social life in the European Union, and its focus on languages provides a rare insight into the social distribution of bilingualism (EC, 2006). As noted above, the overall conclusion of the surveys is that bilingualism is stronger in small countries than in big countries, and more prevalent among non-native English speakers than among English natives. This is a picture of power differences and their alignment with languages. However, among individuals the data show a strong association of bilingualism with occupation rewards, education, social mobility, professional seniority, and cultural interests. These categories are more bilingual, in more languages, and with higher levels of proficiency than at previous periods and compared to other groups. In effect, the predictors of mass population bilingualism appear to be related to

influence and power. The most bilingual categories are the more educated, well remunerated, mobile, and future oriented. By contrast, in the Anglosphere bilingualism is confined to minority communities adjusting to English or to isolated or privileged individuals or language professionals. To some extent, Europeans have overcome a historic tendency of nation states towards monolingualism; however, there are also pressures towards English-only efficiency thinking in the European Union.

Table 1. Who Is Bilingual in Europe?

| SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CATEGORY | % BILINGUAL |
|----------------------------|-------------|
| Students | 77 |
| Educated up to 20+ | 72 |
| Managers | 69 |
| Aged 15–24 | 65 |
| Employees | 57 |
| Aged 25–39 | 55 |
| Self-employed | 50 |
| Men | 47 |
| Average for EU 15 | 45 |
| Educated to age 16–19 | 44 |
| Aged 40–54 | 43 |
| Women | 43 |
| Manual Workers | 41 |
| Unemployed | 40 |
| House persons | 31 |
| Aged 55+ | 28 |
| Retired | 26 |

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