

2 The conflict potential of multilingualism

In the introduction I treated multilingualism, i.e. a situation where several languages exist alongside one another in a society, as if it were naturally and necessarily a setting that is prone to conflict. There is no reason to think that multilingualism must always lead to a conflict, but in many cases, particularly when it overlaps with multiethnicity or multinationality, it does. The reasons for the conflict potential of multilingualism lie in the functions language plays in society – indeed, in any society. Across disciplines, many authors working on partial aspects of language-related conflicts and language regimes, agree that, languages defined as systems have at least two functions in a society.⁶⁴ First, they serve as instruments of communication between people. Second, they can be a constitutive element of identity of an individual or one of the symbols of unity, exceptionality or another feature of a group of people who regard their common language as one of their primary characteristics. Among other terms, many authors refer to these functions either as the “communicative” and the “symbolic” functions of language or the “instrumental” and “expressive” functions.⁶⁵ While the terms

⁶⁴ Some of the authors choose to use terms such as “value” or “dimension” rather than “function” to refer to the same phenomenon. Certainly “function” can be a problematic term because of its association with functionalism as a theoretical approach in social sciences. I do not consider my approach generally functionalist, but I see language answering to at least two needs of individuals, which is identity and communication, and find the term “function” to be best suited to express this.

⁶⁵ A similar distinction using diverse terminology is made by many authors irrelevant of the discipline of their professional origin, among them are David Blum (*Sprache und Politik*, 6), who speaks of “symbolische und kommunikative Funktion”, Rubio-Marín (“Language Rights,” 56-57), who speaks about language being an instrument of communication but also being “a marker of identity, a cultural inheritance and a concrete expression of community” (ibid. This part of Rubio-Marín’s definition is, however, a quote from Leslie Green, “Are Language Rights Fundamental,” *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 25 (1987): 639-669). The distinction made by Rubio-Marín is later referred to by Skutnabb-Kangas (“Language policy,” 274). Wright speaks of communicative and identity functions of language (*Language Policy*, 7). Kraus in *Union of Diversity* (esp. 76-83) and in “Inter-cultural Recognition” (62-65) speaks of the expressive and the instrumental dimensions of language. Hroch in *Europa der Nationen* (64) also makes this distinction explicit speaking

“symbolic” and “expressive” tend to have identical meaning – they both refer to the link between a particular language and the identity of a person or a group – the terms “instrumental” and “communicative” cannot quite be used interchangeably. The former has a much broader meaning than the latter, in fact it comprises it. Language can serve as an instrument of communication, but at the same time (by means of enabling communication) it is one of the conditions (and sometimes “the one”) for the exercise of specific rights and access to resources, such as freedom of speech or education. I prefer to speak of symbolic and communicative functions in order to separate the specifically language-related functions (language as an element of identity, language as the instrument of communication in most general terms) and other instrumental uses of languages, or rather instrumental uses of the first two functions as a means for pursuing other interests. It is the interaction of all these three phenomena which lies at the core of the conflict potential of multilingualism.

2.1 The communicative function of language

A more detailed picture of the conflict potential of multilingualism is best visible when drawn against its most conflict-free, and rather theoretical, version, which is a situation of language being merely an instrument of communication. If this were so, then in a multilingual situation, the choice of the language to serve as language of administration, education or to be used in other domains of public life or even as the sole language of communication to replace the existing diversity would be rather simple. The decision on which language should be appointed to serve these functions would be a question of the higher communication potential, referred to by Abram de Swaan as the Q-value of language.⁶⁶ This is a calculable value which “is the product of the pro-

of the communicative function and the symbolic value of languages. Gerhards in *Mehrsprachigkeit im vereinten Europa* (27–55) speaks of two types of capital – symbolic and instrumental – of language. Gazzola in “Managing Multilingualism” (394) speaks of symbolic and communicative, and Lagerspetz in “On Language Rights” (181–183) speaks of the “expressive and constitutive” and “practical and instrumental” functions.

⁶⁶ De Swaan, “Evolving European Language System,” 246–252; De Swaan, *Words of the World*, 33.

portion of those who speak it [the language] among all speakers in the [language] constellation and the proportion of multilingual speakers whose repertoire includes the language among all multilingual speakers in the constellation.”⁶⁷ In other words, the language to be chosen would be the one which is spoken by as many people as possible as a native language and as many people as possible as second language. The Q-value alone however would not always necessarily be the only indicator. If the language with the highest Q-value nationally were at the same time an internationally disadvantaged language, the best choice would be the language with the internationally highest communication potential. In other words, it would not necessarily be the language of the majority, but the language which would enable all persons involved to become part of the linguistically dominating group worldwide. But even if the differences between the national and international Q-values of the single languages were so low that a decision could not be made on this basis, it could probably still be determined that certain languages would be a more obvious choice for the roles mentioned above than others, as research into the problem shows. For instance, the language demanding the least financial and learning efforts, because of having the simplest grammar for example, could be elevated to this status.

Some people might be opposed to the choice of a particular language, again for reasons of a purely communicational nature. These could include the notion that learning a new language seems too difficult or costly to them, on the one hand, or because they are afraid that they would never achieve the degree of fluency which is common for native speakers and thus would experience certain disadvantages, on the other hand. However, provisions could be made to ensure that the non-native speakers experience only a minimum of disadvantages, for instance by providing for financial compensation of their learning efforts, bi- or multilingual services in the areas which seem most important to them, or enabling them to express themselves in their first language, e.g. in parliaments or when writing final papers at universities etc.⁶⁸ Once these provisions have been met, the benefits from learning this language – as

⁶⁷ De Swaan, *Words of the World*, 21.

⁶⁸ For an example of a principle which could be used for such compensations, see Pool “Official Language Problem.”

opposed to not learning it – would probably outweigh the costs. The following generations would speak the new common language fluently and without objection. If choosing a language of communication were this simple, it would even be possible to choose and implement a single language of communication world-wide as well. This choice could either be based on the actual dominating language, at the moment possibly English, or if no language had an obvious advantage compared to the others, by determining for instance which of the languages in existence would be easiest to acquire. However, in general, the choice of language is not that simple. There are two reasons for this, the first is the symbolic function of language, and the second are the interests bound to language of another kind.

2.2 The symbolic function of language

Language is often associated with a particular national, ethnic, class⁶⁹ or another group membership as well as the uniqueness, unity, antiquity or other characteristics of this group.⁷⁰ Language is a symbol of these characteristics. In order to fulfil this function, the language in question need not be an officially recognised language or a language listed as existent in a relevant lexicon. It can just as well be, and in many cases it is, a dialect, a variety, specific jargon – different people can refer to one and the same language in different manners, depending on their attitude

⁶⁹ “Class” will not stand in the focus of this book. However, in general, language-related conflicts and language regimes as I understand them are to a large extent also applicable when the groups associated with particular languages or language varieties are not understood in ethnic or national, but primarily social terms, such as classes. The issues of communication possibilities, social, political and economic advantages and disadvantages as well as the importance of language status as I describe them later all apply. Also, the principle of the necessity of differentiating between actors and their interests, as well as potential solutions to the conflict and arguments in favour or against them remains valid. Yet some of the particular concepts, the particular types of involvement in a language-related groups or the arguments supporting particular language regimes, would have to be adapted.

⁷⁰ Gerhards in *Mehrsprachigkeit im vereinten Europa* (41–42) discusses the reasons why language serves this role particularly well. These include the personal nature of language as an identity marker – language is acquired since birth – and the fact that it is a relatively unchangeable identity marker which at the same time is generally difficult to acquire to a native-like level later in life.

towards the language or those speaking it. What is important is the fact that someone considers it a vital element of one's identity or the constitutive element of the identity of a group without which this group could not exist as a group anymore. This kind of symbolic attachment could be described as the "identity value" of language, meaning that a specific language system, such as English, German, Catalan, Arabic, etc. is associated with a group of speakers. Understood in this manner and contrary to the calculable Q-value, there is nothing necessarily practical or advantageous about speaking or learning a particular language that fulfils a symbolic function. Some of these languages are very small as far as the number of their speakers is concerned and do not enable communication with a high number of persons. However, the learning of such a language might provide access to a new culture and its heritage or enable official membership in a community and this, just like maximum possible communication, might be of very high value to those who speak it.

There are many difficulties connected to the assumption that language is (mostly) equal to, or constitutive of, identity. I consider several of them throughout the book. The probably most important difficulty however is that the connection between a group identity named "X" and a language named "X" is not always evident or exclusive – several groups can speak the same language and still claim to identify with this language as theirs or the other way round – the identity of a group can be "multilingual". The best known example of the first case is English, which is among the languages most frequently spoken worldwide as first language. Not all first speakers of English however share the same national or cultural identity. Not even the United Kingdom, the state associated as the "home" of English, has a homogenous cultural identity. USA, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, or South Africa are to a large extent English speaking too, but they do not share the same set of identities with each other. Another example of such language sharing without identity sharing is French in Switzerland, Belgium and France. The language is a grammatically identical, yet spoken by people who would not identify themselves as belonging to the same "national" group. In fact, to speak of "English" or "French" as one homogenous entity is already problematic for at least two reasons. The

first difficulty lies in the relatively late emergence of what is considered standard “French” or “English” today – I will return to this problem in more detail in the following section. The second issue relates to the existing or emerging variants of these languages which sometimes differ from the standard language to an extent which raises doubts as to whether they can still be considered as belonging to the same language or rather viewed as their “descendants”. The situation in South Africa can serve as an illustration. Even though de jure the country has 11 official languages, English is the most important language of communication. In his work on South African language policy, Victor N. Webb lists the choice of the variety of English to be used “in formal public contexts”⁷¹ in South Africa as one of the most important language policy dilemmas – since the “white” and “black” “Englishes” differ, but at the same time are part of the identity of the speakers of both, the choice of the “white” variant over the “black” one is threatening to be perceived as a softer version of the “white” domination in South Africa. The “black” variant is however perceived as a low language, rather a language *variety* than *variant* and therefore its implementation as the “official English variety” would probably be faced with difficulties too, being the less prestigious not only in South Africa but also internationally.⁷² At the same time, South Africa is the home of Afrikaans. The language, which has emerged as a codified variety of Dutch, is an example of the completion of the process of emancipation of a variety of language from its colonial “predecessor”.⁷³

The connection between language and identity cannot be taken for granted. Florian Coulmas, for instance, argues that it is only a mystification.⁷⁴ Nevertheless it cannot be denied. Authors writing on

⁷¹ Webb, *Language in South Africa*, 31.

⁷² Webb in *Language in South Africa* (31) offers an example of a particularly extreme attitude expressed by a “young black South African” who at a conference in 1995 “delivered a paper entitled: ‘English? Yes. But whose English? Your English? Or mine?’ and he made it quite clear: ‘We’ are governing this country now, and we will decide what English is acceptable. If ‘you’ don’t like our decisions you can leave the country quite easily. There are no lions at the Johannesburg International Airport, and an air ticket to London is relatively cheap.” According to Webb, “this attitude is, of course, extreme, but it does illustrate the intensity of the debate, which is understandable, given the colonial experience.”

⁷³ For more on the history of Afrikaans, see de Swaan, *Words of the World*, 129–130.

⁷⁴ Coulmas, “European Integration,” 20.

nationalism have very explicitly identified this connection, but many of them also convincingly argued that while evidence for its existence can be traced far back into the history, it is neither primordial nor of uncontested continuity.⁷⁵ A brief history of the connection may illustrate both the symbolic functioning of languages as well as some of the connections between the symbolic and communicative function. Although this overview applies mainly to Europe, the concepts have influenced the perception of the relationship between language and nation elsewhere, and therefore are relevant here

Among the best known pre-modern examples of the link between language and group membership (ascribed or declared) is the etymology of group references, such as “Barbarians” and the Slavonic term “Nemci”. The word “Barbarian” stems from the ancient Greek word for “babble”. The ancient Greeks used the word “barbaroi” – the “babbling ones” to refer to strangers, i.e. no citizens of a polis, whom they, at least initially, could not understand. The same logic led to the name of “Berbers” who were referred to as the babbling ones by the ancient Romans. Similarly, members of the Germanic tribes were referred to as “Nemci” – the dumb, voiceless ones – in Slavonic languages of the Middle Ages, because they could not be understood. The word is still used today to refer to Germans in today’s Slavonic languages.⁷⁶ These examples show that language has been used to identify “us” and “them” for many centuries. They also show that the exact language “the other” spoke was not important. What mattered was that it was a language the “we” did not understand.

In general, however, before the 18th century, the diversity of languages was of little importance to the state.⁷⁷ Certainly, there was need for a language serving for instance as language of administration, religion and education a role which, in large parts of Europe, was taken over by Latin. Fluency in Latin was of great advantage in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. However, only the privileged ones had access to

⁷⁵ See esp. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*; Hroch, *Europa der Nationen*; Smith, *National Identity*.

⁷⁶ For more on these examples, see Kaplan and Baldauf, “Policy and Planning in Algeria,” 14; Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 65; Hroch, *Europa der Nationen*, 59.

⁷⁷ Braunmüller and Ferraresi, “Introduction,” 1–7.

education providing for the knowledge of this language. From the point of view of the demarcation of legitimate belonging of land and people under the jurisdiction of a particular ruler or dynasty, the first language(s) of its citizens were of little consequence, nor had they played a role in relation to the loyalties of the people under specific rule. Either people had the status of bond-slaves and it was their owner who determined their fate: they were not allowed to move and had no need for communication going beyond their workplace. Or they spoke several languages, anyway. In Europe, personal multilingualism was much more widespread several hundred years ago than it is today with the knowledge of several languages being very functional, because different languages were needed to communicate within different life domains.⁷⁸

A change in the political relevance of both language as the element of identification with a group as well as the ability to communicate effectively in one language in the whole state was brought about by several interconnected phenomena related to modernity. Three points were of particular importance in the process. First, a common language as means of communication played a crucial role for the administrative unification and efficiency of the emerging (nation-)states, i.e. centralised and politically unified states, or at least the attempts to create such states. Second, the developing industry in a centralised state required the uniform education of workers for the factories, and at the same time the highest possible mobility of these workers – both objectives could best be achieved by abolishing existing language barriers. Third, language homogenisation played a crucial part in the ideological creation of the nation for this state, i.e. making people not yet “aware” that they “belonged” to a nation aware of this belonging, as well as in the attempts to prevent the creation of such a homogenous nation or only one nation, but rather allow for every nation – understood primarily as a group of people sharing the same language – to develop independently.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Braunmüller and Ferraresi, “Introduction,” 3.

⁷⁹ Authors place different emphasis on the elements of phenomena. For example, Gellner in *Nations and Nationalism* places particular emphasis on industrialisation and the constructed nature of the nation. On the other hand, Hroch in *Europa der Nationen* (49–108) gives a more varied account of an interplay of several factors: the particular historical context, ethnic roots and modernisation.

The exact contents of the “national language” in most cases had not been clear from the beginning. As many authors theorising nation and nationalism, emphasise, none of the “national” languages had always been “national” – the first reason being that prior to the 18th century, no modern nations – and therefore also no “national languages” had existed.⁸⁰ Secondly, the new national language was, at the point of state redefinition, considered to be the particular language spoken by every citizen. According to Hobsbawm, less than 50% of the population of France spoke French or its dialects in 1789. In Italy, only 2.5% of the population used Italian language for “everyday purposes” in 1860 when it was unified.⁸¹ According to Hobsbawm, in other words, every language had to some extent been “architectonically” arranged, sometimes they were even newly invented, and then spread.⁸²

Every “national language” had undergone some kind of a standardisation process, that means, it had been selected as the national variety and adapted for wider use. Those languages which had not been standardised, be it because of a failure of the standardisation process of their own or the lack of interest on part of its speakers to even start such a process, were for the most part marginalised and are considered dialects or found themselves among what today is referred to as “endangered languages”.

The attempts to unite the political and the language unit had been successful to different degrees. While in France, for instance, this attempt is generally considered a success, and French became the only language of the Republic – and as such remained for quite a long time unchallenged – in other cases, such as the highly multilingual and multinational Habsburg monarchy of the 18th and 19th centuries, it was much less successful. At the end of the 18th century, Joseph II tried to transform the Habsburg monarchy into an absolute monarchy with German as the only official language. Previously, Latin had been in use as official, but the ruler regarded it as unsuitable to carry out “effective

⁸⁰ See for example Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 67–69; Hroch, *Europa der Nationen*, 178–200.

⁸¹ Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 60–61.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 54.

work in the interest of masses”⁸³ or – in other words – as a language linking the whole empire.⁸⁴ This policy of language unification, however, was a failure. This was particularly due to the resistance of the Hungarian nobility who feared German domination and demanded that either Latin be retained or Hungarian used in Hungary.⁸⁵ In the end, Latin remained official in Hungary and was in use until 1844.⁸⁶

The Habsburg monarchy is at the same time a particularly good example of the use of the symbolic function of language for the purposes of national movements and fight for political freedom – which was not only the case of Hungarian-speaking population when resisting the imposition of German, but particularly in the case of “small” nations, such as Croats, Serbs, Czechs, and Slovaks. Without the work of a handful of intellectuals who particularly in case of Croats, Serbs and Slovaks spread the idea that people speaking a particular language (or one of its varieties) form a nation, these nations probably would not exist. – Other than the German- and Hungarian-speaking population, the languages of these peoples had no or only limited official status in the monarchy and would most likely gradually disappear.

In this process, the idea of enlightenment was of particular importance because it introduced the necessity of education open to as many citizens as possible – even in their “own” languages, if they were not able to speak the official language. This led to an intensification of interest for the popular languages and their further development for purposes of education, as well as for the “nation” speaking this language.

The conflict between the recognised and non-recognised languages and nations in the Monarchy was sharpened after the so-called “Austro-Hungarian Compromise” which partially restored the sovereignty of the Hungarian kingdom and thus equalised the “Austrian” and “Hungarian” part of the monarchy in 1867 which also led to a change of the name of the state to “Austria-Hungary”. While in the Austrian part of the monarchy there was some space accorded for the use of other than

⁸³ Oscar Jászi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1929), 71, quoted in Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 84.

⁸⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 84.

⁸⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 102; Hroch, *Na prahu národní existence*, 26.

⁸⁶ Medgyes and Miklósy, “Language Situation in Hungary,” 72.

Language-related Conflicts in Multinational and
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