

# Language

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Language has always played a very important part in identity constructions—whether individual, group, or national. Different actors have used language in different ways to construct national, ethnic, and racial identities. The construction of the nation-state has many times depended on language. Likewise, ethnic groups have often constituted themselves on the basis of language. Language is also often racialized so that people with certain linguistic characteristics can be segregated and ostracized. This entry focuses on how nation-states, ethnic groups, and racial groups use language for their own purposes. In so doing, it considers the meaning and the power of what we call “language.”

That language is closely linked to the construction of the nation-state is best exemplified in the case of what we today call Spanish or in some places Castilian. With the marriage of the Catholic monarchs Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon in 1469, the crowns of Aragon and Catalonia and of Castile, Leon, and Galicia were united. Through that political union, the dialectal group that became known as Castilian (Spanish) gained power. In 1492, Antonio de Nebrija published his *Gramática de la Lengua Castellana* (*Grammar of the Spanish Language*), the first grammar of any Romance language. Nebrija dedicated the grammar to Queen Isabella by saying: “Siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio” (Language always was the companion of empire). A single “Spanish” language was needed to rule

subjects and to build an empire (García 2011). Clearly the standardization of language as carried out by grammarians, linguists, and language academies in conjunction with politicians has played an important role in the construction of nation-states and ethnic identities. It is this construction of a standardized way of using words that is today called “language.”

In the eighteenth century the German Romantics, and in particular Johann Gottfried Herder, defined ethnic identity as natural and immovable, and closely connected to the language a people spoke. Herder wrote, “without its own language, a *Volk* is an absurdity, a contradiction in terms” (quoted in Fishman 1972: 48). In *Reden an die Deutsche Nation* (*Addresses to the German Nation*, 1808), Johann Gottlieb Fichte associated language, nation, and state and said: “Those who speak the same language are joined to each other by a multitude of invisible bonds by nature herself. ... They belong together and are by nature one and an inseparable whole” (quoted in Kedourie 1993: 64).

This was also the line of thought continued by the American scholars Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf in the early twentieth century. Sapir asserted that “a particular language tends to become the fitting expression of a self-conscious nationality” and that “such a group will construct for itself ... a race to which is to be attributed the mystic power of creating a language and a culture as twin expressions of its psychic peculiarities” (Sapir 1942: 660). His disciple, Benjamin Whorf (1956), proposed that the language one speaks has an effect on an individual’s thoughts and ways of understanding the world. Perhaps it was Frank Boas who was the first to

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offer a nuanced critique of this unidirectional link between language, ethnicity, and nationalism, pointing out that historical, social, and geographic experiences create differences.

Later in the twentieth century, Joshua A. Fishman, more than any other, studied the relationship between language and ethnic identity. In an essay titled “Language and Ethnicity,” Fishman states, “Language is the recorder of paternity, the expresser of patrimony and the carrier of phenomenology” (Fishman 1989: 32). But Fishman also acknowledges the fluid nature of language and the complexities of the language–identity link, pointing out that language adopts, but also adapts, a group’s subjective belief in a common ethnic identity. Nation-states, however, continue to act today as if there is an immutable link between language, nation-state, and ethnicity, and as if all Germans spoke German, all French spoke French, all Chinese spoke Chinese, and so on.

Nation-states have manipulated language to serve their purposes, at the same time that language has been used to serve constructions of nation-states. The invention of languages, of course, served an important function in the colonization of Africa (Makoni and Pennycook 2007). Missionaries and colonial officers controlled the colonized populations by administratively assigning a state language to them. The processes of linguistic *ausbau* (fostering dissimilarity between varieties of languages) and *einbau* (fostering similarity) have been used frequently in language-planning efforts to construct nation-states and ethnic identities. For example, when British India was partitioned in 1947, Urdu was named the national language of Pakistan, even though many who lived in the area did not speak it. Urdu (in Pakistan) and Hindi (in India) underwent a process of *ausbau* (Fishman 1980 based on Kloss 1967) whereby what was before considered one language,

Hindustani, was separated into Urdu and Hindi, the former written in a modified Persian script and heavily influenced by Arabic and the latter written in Devanagari script and heavily influenced by Sanskrit.

In contrast to the *ausbau* process of Hindi/Urdu, what Yugoslavians learned to call Serbo-Croatian went through a process of *einbau* that standardized the varieties spoken in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia into one so-called language. Since independence, it has again gone through a process of *ausbau*, with Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian considered different languages. These processes of *ausbau* and *einbau*, and the standardization that they produce, are prevalent today and used by nation-states and ethnic groups to consolidate power. But increasingly our traditional definitions of how language functions and how it is manipulated for political reasons are starting to be unmasked. For example, the concept of “diglossia,” with one variety of language used by a society for high functions and powerful domains such as government and school and another variety used in less prestigious domains such as the family (Ferguson 1959), has served us well to describe sociolinguistic situations. But increasingly scholars have taken a critical approach to these descriptions, analyzing how power has created these conditions and raising questions about these arrangements.

Language, as Bakhtin (1981) has posited, emerges from the concrete actions of speakers with certain ideological positions. Scholars influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu have pointed out that ideas about language are always ideological, and are enmeshed in social systems of domination and subordination of groups (Kroskrity 2000).

Heller, speaking about ethnic identity formation, says: “Language is important here [in ethnic identity formation] as a means by

which access to networks is regulated: If you do not speak the right language, you do not have access to forming relationships with certain people, or to participating in certain activities” (1987: 181). And yet, speakers are agentive and resourceful. Pavlenko and Blackledge claim that speakers are “constantly in search of new social and linguistic resources which allow them to resist identities that position them in undesirable ways, produce new identities, and assign alternative meanings to the links between identities and linguistic varieties” (2004: 27). But, of course, the social context can prevent individuals from accessing certain linguistic resources or adopting new identities.

Various metaphors for the ideological use of language have been offered. Blommaert (2010), for example, sees languages as “mobile resources” or practices within social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. Language is not a simple system of structures that is independent of our interactions with others or of our ideologies. The term “linguaging” is thus increasingly being used today to refer to the practices of speakers that are embedded in a web of social and power relations. Today, especially because of the new patterns of global activity that are characterized by intensive flows of people, capital, goods, and discourses, the direct link between language and ethnic and national identity has unraveled. Yet language often continues to be seen as a system of structures, either through the structuralist conception of Saussure or the strictly mentalist conception of Chomsky, both of whom removed the study of language from context of use. This conceptualization of language has served well a powerful elite who especially rely on these definitions to continue to hold on to positions of power—whether national, ethnic, or racial. Thus, for example, language in US schools is often understood as being made up of the linguistic structures and features that are

present in the variety of English spoken by white monolinguals, and not in the varieties spoken by African Americans or Latino bilinguals. It is the variety spoken by the white monolingual middle class that is used in assessments, giving them undue advantage.

Since not all groups have equal power, not all have the agency to take up the language practices of the groups with which they want to be identified or to desist in using the language practices of those from whom they want to be distinguished. A way in which individuals and groups are kept from being agentive is by racializing language. Urciuoli (1996: 15) explains the concept of “racialization” saying that “when people are talked about as a race ... the emphasis is on natural attributes that hierarchize them.” In the United States the Spanish language and bilingualism have often become markers of being nonwhite, of being “out of place,” and have thus minoritized the position of US Latinos and excluded them. Instead of being able to use their bilingualism as a negotiable resource, for Latinos, Spanish is assigned negative status characteristics. The racialization of the language practices of US Latinos has been mostly successful, convincing many, at times, that only standard English monolingualism is the norm and that Latino language practices are a mark of intellectual and racial inferiority and thus a reason for exclusion from educational and social opportunities.

In the same way, the language of black Americans is often seen to constitute “signs of black intellectual inferiority and moral failings” (Alim, Smitherman, and Dyson 2012: 24). Whereas in racist societies language is often racialized to exclude speakers whose varieties do not conform to all the features of white speech, race is rarely linguicized. That is, it is difficult sometimes for racial groups to understand the power of the language varieties they speak. And yet, as Alim, Smitherman, and Dyson say, speaking

about African American varieties of English in the United States, “we not only see race but we hear it too” (2012: 25). This is precisely what makes linguistic profiling possible (Baugh 2003). In the United States it is a white cultural hegemony that keeps upholding the variety of English spoken by white, monolingual, privileged citizens. Language has always been manipulated for national and group interest. Increasingly, however, scholars are uncovering the ideological constructions involved, hoping that speakers will thus acquire more agency to resist the manipulations that keep some groups and individuals oppressed.

SEE ALSO: Class, Status, and Party; Identity, Social-Psychological Aspects of; Nation-State

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