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LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

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Language is a central element of any culture and society. For each human, it is the main instrument for perceiving and evaluating the world around himself or herself. Language is, therefore, a central element of identity: identity implies the perception of one's own strengths and weaknesses, the evaluation of one's own past, the visions of one's own future. Identity provides aims, direction and consistency to the actions of men or women. This self-image or identity is developed through interaction with other people; one's self-image, at least to some degree, must be shared and validated by others. Language plays a central role. To speak a common language per se creates a feeling of communality (Sapir 1951: 157; Whorf 1956; Weber 1964: 305ff.; Goebel *et al.* 1996). Adequate mastery of a language is a decisive determinant of a satisfactory communication with other people, and also for social recognition, self-confidence and the feeling of security in the world. Linguistic problems, from stuttering to dumbness, probably entail the strongest harm to one's self-image and self-consciousness.

In the first part of this essay, I will elaborate the relationship between language and identity and propose a central thesis. Subsequently, I describe five typical, different social constellations in which a change of language can occur. Here, I will present examples from different linguistic areas of the world. Finally, I will present some considerations about the role of language education and politics today.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY — A NORMATIVE AND EMPIRICAL EXPLANATORY APPROACH

Today, in the era of globalisation, different languages and linguistic communities increasingly come into contact with each other. English becomes the *lingua franca* for the world. The danger emerges that smaller languages will be reduced to the status of local idioms. In the world-historical perspective, however, the contact between languages, the change, and even the demise of living languages are not new phenomena at all. The language of the Celts — a culturally advanced people that once lived in large parts of Europe — is today confined to a few small regions or islands of north-western Europe. Even high-level culture languages like classical Greek and Latin have disappeared as living languages. On the other hand, new languages are emerging all the time, typically as hybrids of several older languages; in this way the present-day European standard languages emerged after the breakdown of the Roman Empire. Their present-day forms were fully developed only in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Thus, the decisive question from the viewpoint of the sociology of language is not only how the persistence of a language can be ensured. Additional questions are what are the conditions for the development of a deep commitment to a language, for the willingness to learn a second language and for a change of one's main language? All these issues are closely related to personal and collective identity. An actual example is the Creole in the Caribbean and other parts of the Third World. This idiom, in earlier times vilified as the slaves' dialect (it emerged as a mixture of African, French and English elements), is regarded today as a full language by linguists — a view which makes the natives proud (McWhorter 2005). If the general public is asked which elements are indispensable for making a person a true member of his nation, language is mentioned everywhere in the front rank (Haller and Ressler 2006).

In this essay, I propose the following general thesis: *The commitment to a language, the readiness to retain, learn or abandon it is dependent to a high degree on the relevance of this language for the identity of a person or a collective social unit. If one's self-image is enforced by using a language, a person will use and retain it; if the mastering of a new language contributes to a positive self-image and social recognition in important reference groups, it will be learned willingly; but if a*

language is not conducive or even detrimental to central aspects of personal identity, under certain circumstances it will be soon abandoned in favour of another.

In this regard, we have to distinguish clearly between a language as an intellectual-cultural good, and its speakers or a linguistic community as social facts. From the first point of view, languages possess an intrinsic cultural value; otherwise, nobody would invest so much time to learn “dead languages”. Also the “quality” of a language and of linguistic habits is an issue here; this question belongs mainly to the realm of language sciences. The often deplored “decline of languages”, however, is usually not so much a linguistic problem, but one of an inaccuracy of thinking, a staleness of imagery or a lack of precision, as it is the case in many political speeches (Orwell 1946). The situation looks different from the perspective of concrete speakers or linguistic communities. Here, no language policy should negate the needs and wishes of autonomous individuals, prohibit the use of certain languages, nor impose a language from above. This is valid not only at the level of nation states, but also at that of small linguistic minorities. In the Austrian part of the Habsburg Empire, regional nationalists tried to establish mono-linguistic schools against the will of many parents of their own linguistic group (Goebel 1994: 29). A similar conflict recently arose within the small South Tyrolean minority of the Raeto-Romans, inhabiting the Dolomite Val Gardena/Grödenal; one group tried to enforce the instruction of the Raeto-Roman language in elementary school, but other members of their linguistic group did not support this aim. From this point of view, even the use of the concept of “mother tongue” is problematic (Pennycock 2002). The British colonial empire often forced the education of natives in a specific tongue without considering the fact that many of them spoke more than one language and did, in fact, not have a unique mother tongue.

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND PROCESSES CONDUCTIVE AND OBSTRUCTIVE FOR THE ACQUISITION OR LOSS OF A LANGUAGE

We can distinguish five typical social situations and contexts, correlated to certain interests and values: (1) economic situations and interests; (2) the change of the linguistic context; (3) the socio-cultural appeal of a large, “attractive” language; (4) the feeling of an inferiority of one’s own

language; (5) social and political pressure to adopt a new language. For each of these situations, I will discuss the possibilities of the decisions of the people concerned.

The Mastery of a Language as the Basis for Economic and Social Success

An important basis of personal identity and self-consciousness of an adult person is his economic independence and a secure income. Today, more and more people find themselves in a situation where it is indispensable for economic reasons to learn and use a new language, particularly as a consequence of migration. Insufficient linguistic achievements are among the main reasons for the lack of educational success of children in the United States (Garcia 2002). In Europe, this problem has not received adequate attention. As a consequence of inadequate mastery of the new language and related educational failure, many talented children of immigrants enter into unqualified occupational activities, thereby depriving themselves of life chances and squandering an immense human capital for the host nation. This might be the case for up to 20 million people in the European Union today (Dustmann & van Soest 2002). Economic and social interests of this kind are probably also the most important factors that lead to the abandoning of the native language among linguistic minorities. For example, the Croats in the Austrian province of Burgenland or the Slovenes in the province of Carinthia speak their mother tongue — if at all — only at home or in the neighbourhood; in contrast to the German-speaking South Tyroleans, their languages are spoken only in relatively small and poor countries outside of Austria (Reiterer 1990). It was certainly the factor that induced Napoléon to change his Italian birth name (Napoleone di Buonaparte) into a form more compatible with the French.

There is also a power differential between linguistic areas. The world-wide advance of English as the new international *lingua franca* is closely related to the immense economic and military power of the United States, and — in former times — of Great Britain. It has secured in many areas of international trade, traffic and communication a dominant position for English. In this regard, a self-reinforcing dynamic exists: The economic and social value of the mastering of a language (its “communication potential”) increases the more people are using it (de Swaan 2001). It may be noted, however, that the absorption of English words

in other languages must not imply a degeneration of these as long as they are integrated in an “organic” way (Muhr & Kettemann 2002).

The economic need to learn a new language need not necessarily lead to abandoning one’s original language. In different “linguistic domains” (Fishman 1972, Egger 2001) — in the private domain of family and household, among friends and acquaintances, in the occupational sphere and in public life — it is possible to use two different languages in parallel. The speakers the Raeto-Roman in the Austrian and Swiss Alps are only one of many examples that show that even a small language can persist in the private context over many generations. However, the chances of retaining one’s native language are much better: (a) for the better educated and (b) in societal situations which are not monolingual, as is the case if a person migrates to place where few others are using his language. For the higher educated, it is easier to acquire a second language without giving up the first. Internationally-minded members of the middle and higher social strata in Europe today send their children to international schools with teaching in English. These tendencies are also criticized, however, even in the case of the Netherlands which is very open in this regard (Dronkers 1994).

The positive connection between the mastery of languages and economic success may also apply to collective groups. The economic success of South Tyrol has certainly got to do with the fact that people with a higher education and people engaged in service occupations are bilingual; thus, tourists from both Italy and German-speaking countries can feel comfortable in this Alpine province (Haller 2006). In Europe, knowledge of other languages (mainly English) is better in the North than in South Europe; this might contribute to their greater achievements in science and technology, and probably also in economic life.

Social Networks and Linguistic Behavior in a New Socio-Cultural Context

The necessity to acquire a new language often emerges from a change of the social context which need not necessarily be connected with an occupational change. Two cases are typical in this regard: linguistic intermarriage and the migration of a family to a country with another language. In these cases, three factors are relevant for the question of whether a person continues to use his or her original language and passes it on to children.

If the general social context is monolingual, the retaining of the native language will become difficult. The social recognition of persons who live in a new linguistic context is directly related to the degree to which they master this language. Immigrant, well-educated women who married Americans often have the feeling that their acquaintances are not able to recognize their true capabilities (Stoessel 2002). The feeling of linguistic incompetence is often connected to a crisis of identity, an impairment of self-image. In this case, the possibilities of learning the new language and of retaining, at the same time, the native language depend from the social networks of the persons involved. If close relations with other speakers of the mother tongue persist, retention will be facilitated. This problem becomes most acute if a linguistically mixed pair have children. On the one hand, parents will be anxious that their children acquire a perfect mastery of the new language. On the other hand, they would probably like to see that their children also learn their own mother tongue; only in this way can the children converse with their grandparents or other kinsmen in the country of origin (Egger 2001).

If the new social context is multi-lingual, learning and retaining two languages will be facilitated. This is the case in South Tyrol, but in part also in multilingual countries, such as Switzerland, Belgium or Canada, where two or more languages have an official status as “state languages”. For speakers of German in South-Tyrol, or for the French-speaking Belgians, there exists an additional backing of their language by the fact that it is also spoken in a large neighbouring country. As a consequence, they can resort to an immense supply of print (magazines, books) and other media products (television programs, films) in their language. However, the disadvantage of small languages also has a positive side in this regard. Since it does not pay economically to translate films and TV programs into such languages, these programs are imported in their original languages with the use of sub-titles. In this way, children get acquainted with the foreign language. This is certainly one of the reasons for the quite good command of English among the Dutch and Scandinavians.

If the new societal context is monolingual, retaining the native language depends on two factors: The availability of a social network of close acquaintances speaking the same language, and one’s own commitment to this language. It has been found that immigrants to the USA often developed an emotional attachment to their home language which was related only to the language, its typical imaginations and

sounds (Stoessel 2002: 109). Both factors are closely related to each other: People who do not set a high value on maintaining their mother tongue will also not positively evaluate contacts with other speakers of this language, or try to participate in related cultural activities. As far as I know, so far there exists no systematic research on the question of when and how such a linguistic commitment emerges. We can assume that the attitudes of parents, the educational career and the personal interest of children in reading works of classical authors are relevant here.

Socio-Cultural Incentives for the Acquisition of a New Language

The world-wide triumphant procession of English has not only economic and political causes. It is also related to the specific socio-cultural attractiveness of this language, particularly for young people. Anglo-Saxon mass culture demonstrates high productivity and world-wide success (which is related to the strong economic interests and forces behind its big producers). For a long time, American culture has better been able to adapt its film, TV and music production to the tastes of a mass public (Münch 1986). English terms (*Anglizismen*) are widely adopted in science, technology and the most advanced sectors of economic life. Information technology and the Internet have been developed to a large extent by Americans. There are few other socio-cultural variables which are so closely correlated with age than the knowledge of English. In Italy, for instance, about 80% of teens (between 15 and 17 years old) speak a second language (overwhelmingly English); this value decreases in a nearly linear way to only 11% among those aged 75 years or more (ISTAT 1995: 79f.).

Devaluation and Rejection of a Language

This case is the opposite of the above. There are also situations and contexts in which a language as a whole is seen as providing little prestige, even as being detrimental in this regard. Therefore, there exist few incentives to use a language, particularly in the public sphere.

Three social reasons for a high prestige of a language can be mentioned: (1) the number of its speakers; (2) its cultural level, as it can be ascertained through the existence of a fully-developed grammar, a considerable literature etc.; and (3) its political support, that is if the language is

an “official” nation-state language. These three characteristics are usually correlated, but not necessarily so. Even some local languages are spoken by millions of people, such as in India (see Berger 1995); on the other hand, small states in Europe (such as the central East European, Baltic and Scandinavian states) have their own national languages. The recognition of a small minority language as an officially recognized language (which usually means that it is the teaching language in the compulsory school system, that their speakers have the right to use in public offices, etc.) is very important for the self-consciousness of a linguistic group. This has been shown, for instance, for South Tyrol (Egger 2001) and for the language of the Basques which was suppressed under the Franco regime (Valandro 2002: 30ff.).

The amount of political support given to a language varies considerably, depending on the size and power of the respective state. Germany and France, for instance, support cultural institutes in many countries around the world whose aim is also to propagate their respective national languages; smaller countries like Slovenia, Hungary or Finland cannot afford such things. This difference has also to do with “national prestige” which large nations usually consider as more important than small ones (Weber 1964: 313f.). But also national self-consciousness enters here. Some scholars argue that in Germany and Austria different variants of “standard German” exist (Muhr *et al.* 1995). German is comparable to English and Arabic in this regard; they are all *polycentric languages* that exhibit not only a standardized literary language but also several national and regional variants (Pohl 1996). The peculiarities of “Austrian German”, for instance, can be shown in the existence of several hundred different words for the same objects, in different forms of address, variants of speech and dialogue. Officially (for instance, in linguistic encyclopedias), however, Austrian German is not considered as a discrete variant of German. It seems also that something like “symbolic power” (Bourdieu 1992) exists here, whereby Germany plays a dominant and Austria a subordinate role. In such cases, the language is less frequently seen as a distinctive characteristic of national identity; a paradigmatic example in this regard is Ireland (Haller & Ressler 2006; for the EU as a whole see Loos 2000). A concomitant of unequal relations of this kind is also the fact that linguistic minorities in states with a dominant language often take over concepts from that language, particularly in the area of public administration. So, in South Tyrol today

there exist many words taken from Italian which an Austrian does not understand; the provincial government has published a Terminological Dictionary of the official administrative language in South Tyrol (Egger & Langthaler 2001).

The problem of the prestige of a language and a linguistic community may also be relevant for answering the question why the Italian-speaking population in South Tyrol learns and speaks less well the German than vice versa (Egger 2001: 82ff.). One reason for this may be the fact that linguistic domains exist in South Tyrol in which the use of the Italian predominates, but no corresponding others, where German predominates.

A second reason is related to the way in which a language is used and the linguistic form of expression; this tells a lot about the personality of the speaker (Sapir 1951: 160). This form of expression also includes the pitch of the voice, the length and kind of sentences that are formulated, and the ability to adapt the linguistic enunciation to one's dialogue partner. Also these forms of linguistic behavior are different among Italian and German speakers. The more distancing, coolish and factual mode of people speaking German (and other Nordic languages) may make it difficult to Italians to appropriate such a behavior. The investigation of such differences would be a promising avenue of interdisciplinary research. Such research could also make use of qualitative methods, like *conversation analysis*, developed in the context of ethnomethodology (Auer 1998; Wei 2002; Torras & Gafaranga 2002).

Third, national and cultural pride is relevant here. The ambivalence of many Italian-speaking pupils when they have to learn German may also have to do with the fact that this language is disliked, more or less consciously, among their parents. It seems that the Romanic peoples of Europe generally have some problems in learning other languages because in their view a close association exists between the complex of fatherland/home, country/nation and language (Goebel 1993/94).

Societal and Political Pressure Towards the Establishment of a Dominant Language

In the history of Europe we can observe that in many countries new languages were imposed upon peoples with more or less force. In the long run, a state ultimately has more pull than the unorganized community of

the speakers of a language, particularly so if this is a minority in a situation of *diaspora*. This is the reason why people of Austrian or German origin living in Hungary or Romania today are no longer able to communicate with their grandparents in German. The most comprehensive efforts to impose languages from above have been made in the course of the ascent of the modern nation-states (Sapir 1951:167). Particularly, France has a long history of the suppression of minority languages; the *langue d'oeil*, the language of the dominant North, was imposed by force on the peoples of the *langue d'oc* in Southern France (Goebel 1993/94: 96ff., Spolsky 2001, Oberndörfer 2006).

However, in the short run, — or, maybe, today — such efforts are often doomed to failure. In Algeria, after gaining independence in 1962, the government started a massive language policy with the aim to implement classic Arabic in all public spheres (a recent decree for this aim was enacted in 1998). Many observers, however, consider this policy as a failure; colloquial Algerian Arabic which has taken over many elements from other languages (particularly French and Berber languages) continues to flourish. A discrete musical and artistic production emerged whose singers were successful even in Paris (Benrabah 2001). The same happened with the attempted Italianisation of South Tyrol by Italian Fascism in the 1920s and 1930s. One of its effects was that it awakened self-consciousness and a spirit of resistance among South Tyroleans. A similar process could be observed in Spain where the Fascist Franco regime suppressed the Catalan and Basque languages without any long-lasting success (Valandro 2002).

The pressure towards the establishment of a dominant language must not be an officially declared political aim, however. The case of the United States shows that a high pressure towards assimilation can be effective without an explicit language policy. In spite of the fact that the USA often praises itself on the grounds of its cultural openness and variety, *de facto* a high pressure towards linguistic assimilation is at work. It is also connected with a certain nationalistic and chauvinistic stance. The typical member of the upper classes in the USA, the so-called wasps (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) probably looks with a certain dose of contempt down on people who speak Spanish (Garcia 2002); children who speak Latin American languages are discriminated against in several regards. This is the more problematic because in a few decades for demographic reasons Spanish will have quite a large weight in this

country. It is in stark contrast to Europe or also to India (Berger 1995) that very few Americans are in command of a second language.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is a matter of fact that there are huge differences between different people in their commitment to a language. The learning of a language in the parental home and at school is doubtless highly important in this regard. If a child grows up in a setting in which interest in reading and in books is transmitted, a commitment to a language will develop. From the sociological point of view, language education includes not only the learning of grammar and vocabularies, but also the capacity to use it in everyday life. In this regard, school education can contribute a lot, but much of the present style of teaching is inadequate. Teaching should be structured in a much more vivid way, involving much more active participation of the children than is presently the case. Small teaching classes are certainly a primary precondition for this. This is particularly so for the teaching of a national language to immigrants, which is one of the main tasks of most advanced European nations today. But also in the world of work, the linguistic integration and improvement of all members of an organization should be seen as an important task. We must admit, nevertheless, that the development of a world-wide *lingua franca* is a big advantage that certainly outweighs the many problems associated with it.

At the national and European levels, a danger for smaller languages and for the preservation of cultural diversity comes from two sides. In the case of the languages of small states and of linguistic minorities the problem is whether they will be able to assert their status in the future as fully-fledged languages used in all spheres of life. A second question is whether the comparative good knowledge of third languages will persist in Europe. As a consequence of the enforcement of English as the second language, the interest in other languages often vanishes. This trend can clearly be observed in Switzerland where English becomes more important than German or French as a second language. Also knowledge and use of the languages of smaller neighbour states should be furthered in a systematic way. These countries should also back up their domestic literary, film and TV production. Such a sponsorship may come into

conflict with the main aim of the European Union to strengthen the market and competition in all spheres and to push back state interventions (Fabris 1994). However, this political priority of the EU may be one of the reasons why such a deep-going split in the approval of integration among elites and citizens exists (Haller 2008). The EU is ill-advised in this regard and should recognize that social and cultural issues have the same basic importance as those of the economy and the market.

The EU could also make much more use of its linguistic diversity in its symbols. One has the impression that the Euro banknotes are produced for illiterates since they feature practically no text. Why should each member country of the Euro Currency Area not print the value of the bills in its national language? This could be supplemented by two or three large European languages. On some banknotes of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy the value of a bill was printed in ten different languages. Also the principle that only “national” languages are recognized as official EU languages leads to absurd consequences; Catalan, for instance, spoken by over 7 million people, is not recognized as such, but Maltese which is spoken only by 300,000 people is.

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