
Language and Ethnicity in Central and Eastern Europe: Some Theoretical Aspects

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Summary

The author defines ethnicity as a community which enables a reproduction of culture. i.e. a system of moral regulation within communities. Cultural identity of a community is a means by which it affirms its moral value *vis-à-vis* others. The elements of culture (language, religion, customs, historical legacy) serve to an ethnic community for defining borders towards other communities. Nationalism (particularly in Central and Eastern Europe) makes use of the mobilization of ethnic identities. A prominent role in that process is played by intellectuals, who have monopoly over cultural production, particularly over the imposition and preservation of the language standard.

On the background of this theoretical and historical analysis, the author highlights the causes of intensive ethno-nationalist conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe.

There is hardly a more high profile political problem in Central and Eastern Europe than that of ethnicity; and language is universally interpreted as the innermost significance of ethnicity. Much ethnic conflict evidently centres on language. An outsider might conclude that if only language issues could be settled - and they seem so obvious and trivial - the ethnic tensions that plague the region could be eased. After all, reasonable people should not really care about low-level difficulties like whether a village has monolingual or bilingual street signs. And by the same token, does it really matter if an ethno-linguistic minority is obliged to learn the language of the majority, everybody has to learn the language of the state, do they not?

The argument to be put forward in this article is that this level of analysis misses the underlying dynamics of language, ethnicity and power and that while it is possible to find solutions for inter-ethnic tension, the true causes of it have first to be identified. This requires a close look at exactly what ethnicity is and why language plays such a salient role in ethnic self-definitions, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.

Much of the conventional analysis begins from the assumption that ethnicity is only made political by “artificial” means and that people belonging to different ethnic groups have lived together in peace for centuries, implying that if were not for these “artificial” interventions, they would continue to do so. This approach misses several points. Indeed, it implies

a kind of moral disapproval and says nothing about the dynamics of ethnicity, which might actually held in understanding inter-ethnic relations.

The clue to a sharper insight into the phenomenon is that ethnicity operates simultaneously on several planes, only one of which is political. But while in pre-modern societies the political system did not impinge too directly on cultures, with coming of modernity it began to do so. This had far-reaching consequences for the way in which cultures now had to define themselves politically and to respond to the imperatives of political power. Culture, politics, society and the way in which they interact have to be clarified before some sense is made of what ethnicity does and why.

The starting assumption in this argument is that ethnicity is about cultural reproduction¹. Those who are members of a cultural community will spend much of their lives in sustaining it, nurturing it and gaining the approbation of others for their collective attainments. There is a persuasive explanation for this. A culture is a system of moral regulation in the deepest sense. It seeks to establish a coherent world² about which a community can organise itself and draw meanings for and about its own existence.

How people live, the individual's relationship with the wider world, other people included, are structured by their membership of the community. The way in which a community is constituted, the precise nature of the relationship between the individual and the community - this inevitably comes to involve questions of political power - vary from community to community. These variations then come to constitute the raw material for ethnic conflict, because each community is axiomatically convinced of the rightness of its morality and its superiority to all others. In short, each and every ethnic community is looking to validate its "moral worth", its standing in the world, in its own eyes and in the eyes of others.³

Ethnic groups are, therefore, structured around systems of moral regulation. They define themselves by a wide range of possible means, both internally and towards the outside world. Anything can play this role of marker⁴ ways of delimiting the external boundary of the community, from language, religion, territory or history - to be precise, memory, ie history

¹Pierre Bourdieu. *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).

²On the psychology of coherence see Csaba Pleh, "A narrativumok mint a pszichológiai koherenciateremtés eszközei" [Narratives as instruments for creating psychological coherence] *Holmi*, Vol. 8, No.2 (February 1996), pp. 265-282.

³Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁴On boundaries and markers, see Fredrik Barth (editor), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organisation of Culture Difference* (Bergen/Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969).

as recalled - to banal instruments of reproduction, like dress codes to foodstuffs (“we don’t eat this because we are Ruritanians”) [“Ruritanian” here is a metaphor for any of the ethno-linguistic groups of the region]. Crucial to this process is that both explicit and implicit markers are involved. People will adhere to certain ways of doing things without having any idea of why - they are then involved in the process of cultural reproductions⁵. By definition, no one can fully comprehend all the social and cultural processes of which they are a part; no one has perfect rationality.

Language is widely regarded as the central if not indeed the only boundary marker. There is a widespread assumption that a nation, in order that it can call itself a nation, should have its own language. This proposition is a misperception, though one that is understandable, given that most of the obvious transactions within a collectivity take place through the medium of language and the members of the group come to regard that medium as theirs alone and as the “natural” means of expressing their own existence.

The role of language as an ethnic marker has been particularly salient in Central and Eastern Europe and cultural communities in the region use language in this way with great emphasis. There are good reasons for this, to be found in the history and social structure of the area. Nationalism came to Western Europe first in the 19th century and it was constructed around the then existing framework of states and institutions. Essentially this meant that the pre-existing system of states, which used loyalty to the monarch as the principal cement, received a new legitimation, that of nationhood. Nationhood was the medium through which political power, the monopoly of the aristocracy until then, could be devolved to other social strata, because it offered a set of loyalties cohesive enough to ensure that the newly empowered groups would not secede. In this sense, the coming of nationalism was expressly democratic.

In Central and Eastern Europe the new doctrine was received with enthusiasm as a way of challenging the power of the ruling empires and to launch the process of modernisation. This was understood as meaning reaching the standards of power, economic well-being and above all moral worth, meaning the power of cultural attraction⁶ that was seen in the West. The reception of nationalism, the newly developed doctrine of popular enfranchisement and empowerment, was particularly welcome to a newly arisen social stratum - the secular intellectuals. The Enlightenment brought into being a sizeable group of individuals who saw as their *raison d’être* the generation of new ideas, of new means of interpretation and

⁵Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE, 1995).

⁶Isaiah Berlin’s “bent twig” argument is directly relevant in this context. See his “The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism” *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: John Murray, 1990).

the shaping of social and cultural values, independently of church and monarch.

In the West, the activities of the intellectuals took place in a relatively confined arena, against the competition of other groups, like the rising entrepreneurial classes, the remnants of the aristocracy, the new bureaucracies and the industrial working classes as the 19th century wore on. In Central and Eastern Europe, however, these strata were weak to non-existent, so that the intellectuals had the field largely to themselves. This was a key moment - the encounter between the new intellectuals and the equally new doctrine of nationalism. The encounter was highly successful and they have never looked back.⁷

The central activity of intellectuals is their use and control of language and in Central and Eastern Europe they acquired a near-monopoly. They were directly involved not merely in interpretation and evaluation, but through their formulation of the new national languages and the reformulation of the national community, they gained access to authority and prestige without parallel. No longer involved in the supervised legitimation of dynastic or ecclesiastical power, they were largely unconstrained and could pursue moral legislation, in the definitions of future and past and in the elaboration of the lifeworld, thanks to their control of the language.

From the outset, Central and East European intellectuals found themselves having to define cultural communities from rather limited raw materials and having to argue their case in political as well as cultural terms, given that the ruling empires were looking to homogenise their populations in the name of greater efficiency and imperial loyalty. Thus from the outset, questions of language and literacy acquired a political dimension in Central and Eastern Europe that they did not have in the West.⁸

The arguments used to legitimate the bid for power began as a mixture of legal, historical and political claims, but it was soon evident that these propositions would not provide the popular base needed to mount a challenge serious enough to induce the ruling dynasties to cede power. In this connection, the example of the French Revolution was infectious. To mobilise the people, the people had first to be defined. Given the emphasis on language that was the stock-in-trade of the intellectuals, coupled with the weakness of other means of mobilisation, "the people" were those who spoke the same language. This was perfectly logical, for conditions were unlike revolutionary France, where all the subjects of the Kings of France were simply "citizens".

⁷Zygmunt Bauman, "Intellectuals in East-Central Europe: Continuity and Change" *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 1, No.2 (Spring 1987), pp. 162-186.

⁸Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

There were, as a matter of fact, some attempts to construct political nations on a geographical rather than a cultural-linguistic base - Bohemianism, the idea that all the inhabitants of Bohemia regardless of their culture and language, constituted a nation, was one of these. It failed, because it lacked the dynamism that derives from an authentically felt sense of community. Language was the factor that worked.

The implication is that where the state has not carried out the process of civic homogenisation, as it had in the West, culture as embodied in language was a much more effective basis for political power than contiguity. The devolving of power on all could only take place if those with power could be secure that the newly empowered would use it responsibly. Thus in Central and Eastern Europe, the use of language as a primary instrument of mobilisation - the one that intellectuals handled the most readily - has left an indelible mark on politics, on the cultural community and on relations with other cultures.

The role of language in the region assumed a saliency, therefore, because it was the most effective political resource and because the gap between the existing distribution of political power and culture was too great. The integration of culture and power had not taken place, as it had in the West, nor indeed had the integration of political power and language. This made the task of the mobilisers that much more complex. Furthermore, not only did people have to be mobilised to become conscious of their cultural community, but the principal marker of the community - language - had still to be defined.

Hence language became both instrument and aim. Those who spoke or could be made to speak a particular language - a national, hence a politically legitimate language - were the usable material of the nation, its members in whose name power could be demanded. Because they spoke the language, they could be deemed a cultural community with moral worth. In this way, the circle was completed. The outcome of this process was to endow intellectuals with a particular role in the maintenance of language which they have never relinquished and language has acquired a very special quality as symbolic of the moral right to exist.

In other polities where political identities are less directly focused on language, institutions assume a larger role in the construction and maintenance of identities. The civic dimension of nationhood - that which reflects the values of citizenship - is then easier to sustain, though ethnicity exists there too, as in Western Europe. But in Central and Eastern Europe, language has primacy. In local perceptions, the axiom is language; as the Hungarian writer Gyula Illyes once put it, "the nation lives in its language". If there is a language, then its speakers constitute a community; if a community has its own language, it must be a nation; and as a nation, it has the right to constitute its own state and become a subject of history. Needless to say, all the above is not much more than a le-

gitimating formula, albeit one with extensive resonance and recognition in the region.

The legacy of this can be seen today in the determined efforts of the Croatian authorities to make the Croatian language as different from Serbian as possible. The creation of new vocabularies is not merely the artificial crafting of new markers but is symbolic of the proposition that the Croatian nation has its own language and, therefore, has the moral right to constitute a state.

Language, however, is nothing like as straightforward a category as linguistic nationalists, and for that matter conventional opinion, assume. Language has to be identified, codified and imposed; diverse dialects have to be forged into a single standard. This is not necessarily destructive, as some have suggested - there is a trade-off in terms of wider comprehensibility and access to a high cultural medium on the part of those whose linguistic competence was restricted to others speaking the same dialect. Thus a degree of linguistic centralisation seems the inevitable price for mutual comprehension and the interchangeability of skills that modernity demands.⁹

At the same time, though, this process of centralisation in Central and Eastern Europe endowed language with a symbolic as well as a functional role. The acquisition of the newly defined high cultural language¹⁰ is simultaneously a way of reproducing the moral community and the legitimation of its moral worth. Hence to speak Ruritanian is effectively a duty, not just an everyday activity. Once a group has called its language into being and that move has generated a degree of resonance, the community can be said to have come into existence. Other political, cultural, economic etc claims and assumptions follow on from there. Note the contingent nature of language. It cannot be called into existence from nothing, there has to be some sociocultural basis for it, but whether a group defines itself as having or not having its own language is in no way predetermined.

There are quite a few dialect groups in the region that could have formed the core of a high cultural language, but for contingent reasons its speakers would not or could not take this step (Kashub is an example). Thus in Central and Eastern Europe defining a language is not as simple as it looks with hindsight. With the exception of Polish, no language has a continuous high cultural tradition. There are discontinuities in the use of languages as effective instruments of communication matching the demands of modernity; hence their ability to claim the status of being a national language (with moral worth) was not self-evident. This was the background

⁹Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

¹⁰John Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

to the language renewals or language creations of the 18th and 19th centuries.

High cultural languages are vital both instrumentally and as legitimation. They ensure recognition for the community that speaks it, thereby notionally placing the language community beyond assimilation. It implies control over one's destiny, over the morality and cultural codes peculiar to the group that speaks it, it demarcates the group from others, it is a warning sign saying "keep off". Equally, it is a guarantee of access to modernity and it can energise a somnolent peasant community by promising the rewards of wealth, status and power implicit in entry into the modern world. Having one's own language means that political, social, cultural and civic institutions can operate without interference from outside.

Hence the rationality of the switch by the Hungarian elite from Latin to Hungarian in the 19th century. On the face of it, Latin, a neutral language under the control of the Hungarian elite, would have served the rulers of multi-lingual Hungary better than insisting on Magyarisation; the switch to Hungarian was essential to legitimate the claim to a high cultural presence and modernity. Not least, Latin could not have competed with German, the language of Vienna. Having one's own language was understood as offering access to Europe, the summit of moral worth, and a further guarantee of cultural survival. Members of language groups who have never had their collective existence questioned find it extremely difficult to empathise with the fear of extinction; it is real enough as a phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe. And genocide or attempted genocide is not unknown either.

The confluence of these processes has left its mark on language in Central and Eastern Europe. There is, for a start, a very high level of linguistic intolerance in the polity, at the political level. Civic virtue is collapsed into cultural virtue and identified with monolingualism. Multi-lingualism is understood as a weakness that potentially threatens the future of the community. Hence the near-desperate contests for the symbolic continuity of the language, the insistence that the national language has always been the dominant high culture medium; in practice this is expressed as supremacy. One state must equal one language. This bears very hard on ethnolinguistic minorities.

It is worth looking briefly at the real, as distinct from the perceived state of affairs in this context. A clear-sighted sociological look at ethnic minorities will show that while they may retain an attachment to their cultures and moral regulation, where political codes are concerned, they have very largely accepted the patterns of the majority (which dominate the state). In essence, the modern, all-intrusive state has effected a very successful integration of minorities in virtually all the areas that fall under the heading of citizenship. Their loyalty to the state is high and while that loyalty can be alienated, minorities are not inherently secessionist. In-

deed, their attitudes towards the kin state, where other members of the same ethnic group live, can vary from indifference to hostility.

At the same time, the modern state - and that includes the highly coercive communist state - has proved unable to assimilate ethnic minorities, once they have become conscious of their identity. Again, this proposition has far-reaching implications. Further attempts at linguistic assimilation are futile or counterproductive. Policies pursued by majorities aimed at driving minority languages out of existence will fail. Even when the minority is stripped of its intellectuals and it has no prospects for upward social mobility within the ethnic group, it will not abandon its identity. From this perspective, majorities would do better to abandon their useless attempts to weaken or eliminate ethno-linguistic minorities and to concentrate on securing their loyalty as citizens.

There are countless examples to support these arguments. The Hungarians of Rumania, despite very severe repression under Ceausescu, have not given up their Hungarian identity. The Roma, at the bottom of the social ladder and universally despised throughout the area, are currently looking to construct a new, more politicised identity - even without a shared language. The Poles of Lithuania may have virtually no intellectuals and share a religion with the Lithuanian majority, yet there is no indication that they will abandon their Polishness. The Macedonian Slavophones of Greece, despite being effectively denied the most basic rights needed for cultural reproduction, have not disappeared.

All the futility of linguistic oppression demands an explanation. Again, it should be sought in the rationality of cultural reproduction and the perception that it is gravely threatened. Each and every nation in Central and Eastern Europe is beset by a deep fear about its survival. They see threats to their existence from their neighbours and, for that matter, in global trends. The past - memory - is seen as malign and the future is potentially dark, hence the defence of the language, the “keystone of the nation”, is understood as a transcendental duty imposed on all members of the cultural community. This duty is superior to human rights, to collective rights, to individual rights, to democracy, to constitutional provisions, to international covenants, whatever, and it is insisted on with an obstinacy that only makes sense if the fear of extinction is recognised.

Broadly, these factors constitute the explanatory framework for why linguistic coexistence at the high cultural level is so extraordinarily difficult to establish in Central and Eastern Europe and why seemingly simple problems acquire an apparently inexplicable and deep-rooted insolubility. What may seem “silly” or “tribal” to the outsider, not least the West European outsider, has profound meaning and resonance to the contestants, which no amount of mockery will wipe out or weaken.

The significance of these arguments is that the interaction between politics and culture produces a set of dynamics that have to be inter-

preted together for the processes to make sense. The contests for language go way beyond the immediate issues of, say, bilingual administration as a technical convenience for the minority; rather, a wide range of issues at first sight having little or nothing to do with language as such are affected, bringing one community into conflict with another.

Take the example of minority language universities. On the face of it, this should be a straightforward matter of educational resources. Essentially, any language community over a certain size can support higher education and, therefore, goes the technocratic argument, the state ought to make provision for it. Politico-culturally things are not as simple. It is not a matter of technical educational policies, but of a symbolic issue that the majority simply cannot accept, that the minority has intellectual aspirations that might make its members fit for high office and compete in the world of moral values where the majority insists on exclusivity. Crucially, if the moral worth of the minority is accepted, its claim to participate in the shaping of the state is very hard to deny. The university, therefore, acquires a symbolic, moral value that takes it right out of the politics of education.

Given the value attached to high culture, a university becomes the symbol of moral worth that a majority will do anything to deny minorities, because - goes the argument - in one territory only one system of moral regulation can exist. Besides, a group which has its separate system of moral-cultural regulation and moral worth will gain recognition universally and that, in turn, can be understood as a weakening of the integrity of the state. Thus it is not just education but the nature of identity that is at issue - the reproduction of the minority's culture and thus of its moral substance, as well as the people to bear it through to the next generation. This analysis helps to explain the obdurate refusal of, say, the Macedonian and the Rumanian authorities to allow the establishment of minority language university provision for ethnic Albanians and Hungarians respectively.

The above analysis may sound excessively pessimistic. This need not be the case. It is not impossible for two or more ethno-linguistic communities to live together and share power in the same state. But that happy state of affairs requires a high degree of sensitivity towards the moral worth of all ethnic communities and before that comes about, they must all be made secure in their own future and their own unimpeded cultural reproduction.