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A history of Europe

Cultures, languages, nations

The history of Europe can, like that of anywhere else, be examined from all the angles that the professionals in the field have considered relevant: kings and wars, treaties and frontiers, society and economy, people's lives and culture or so many other approaches that are equally fruitful and illustrative, either alone or in combination.

And if, as in the present case, we are talking about identities and memory, of past constructions and possible present processes, the subject of language may prove as relevant and significant as the others. In any event, the past is an unavoidable reference because hardly anything of what is happening now, and of the things that might happen, in this subject of languages as in so many others, can be understood if we do not at least grasp the contemporary evolution of ideas and facts. For example, if we do not understand that a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago Catalan was one of the many more or less important languages in Europe that seemed on one hand sentenced to final extinction and on the other was already being vindicated as the language of a nation aspiring to some effective form of political existence. If historical comparison is as significant as it is detestable, this is because right now, at the start of this twenty-first century, most of those tongues (many of them with less demography and "less history" than Catalan) are now effectively national and state languages, with nobody arguing over their category and official status in this commercial and ritual invention known as the European Union, while Catalan is still denied the basic necessities and rights in this field and certain others. It would not matter perhaps, if it were all a matter of trade and rituals and treaties, but it could matter a lot because languages in Europe have never been dissociable from peoples or nations, and nations and peoples have never easily been dissociable from languages, either two hundred or one hundred years ago, or now even. This is the deeper substance of the matter, which is a subject that I already tried to explain or clear up many years ago, and which I will now put forward with ideas that I

think still retain the same value as when I developed them for the first time. In order to go straight into the matter with no further introductions, I will resort to an emblematic quote like the following to present the terms of the question: “A people without its own language is only half a nation. A nation should hang on to its language more than to its territory: it is a safer barrier, a more important frontier than a mountain or a river”. These are the words of an Irish patriot, quoted by Carl D. Buck in a classic article on language and sentiment of nationality, published in 1916 in the *American Political Science Review*. Observe the date and the place: 1916, Ireland, a country where a genuine war of independence could not bring a language already almost extinguished back to life. Later in the same article Buck also quotes a professor Mahaffy, not a great sympathiser of the cause, who states: “It seems a great mistake that differentiated nationality can only be sustained by differentiated language”. Curiously, a few years later, the first president of the republic of Ireland, Eamon de Valera, assured that if they had given him the choice between language and independence, he would have preferred language: it is not hard to guess why. In any case, the affirmations of the patriot and the professor could express, with no further qualifications, the terms of a long-standing debate. If weightier authorities need to be quoted, and from distant times, I cannot help remembering on one hand the allegation of the English prelates at the Council of Constance, in 1414, at times of schism, of confusion and pre-national affirmations, when they demanded their own separate representation, invoking the “*diversitatem linguarum, quae maximam et uerissimam probant nationem et ipsius essentiam, iure diuino pariter et humano*”. And at the other end of the scale, the affirmation of Antoine Meillet, one of the fathers of social linguistics:



Ocell i cama (Bird and Leg)
Antoni Tàpies (2005)
paint on paper
50 x 64 cm

“Une nation n’est pas liée à tel ou tel soutien matériel, et pas même à la langue. Appartenir à une nation est affaire de sentiment et de volonté”. Meillet, as a linguist, was a disciple of Saussure, but in these statements one can see a much greater influence of Ernest Renan’s teaching, and the faithful following of French national ideology, which at that time —these are words published in 1918— was being applied to proving that Alsace and Lorraine were France, precisely without seeing any obstacle in the past or present *diuersitas linguarum*.

To help clear up the terms and concepts used in these texts, we should remember that we do not need to have any faith in the immutable essence of nations, nor that any such essence has any *iure diuino* or even any *human* foundation. But neither is it a matter of faith that the nation should be a question only of sentiment and will —that is, of psychology— without any material basis in political history, in culture and in language. The issue now is not one of looking into the real foundation of the concepts and thus involving knowing if the 15th century bishops, the early 20th century linguists or the Irish patriots were actually *right*. Amongst other reasons because, at least in modern and contemporary European history, which is what is now in question, everyone has acted as a persuaded patriot in this subject of language and national identity. When I say “everyone”, I mean politicians and governors, practical or theoretical nationalists, soldiers, teachers and university professors, journalists and the general public. This means that it is not actually a matter of knowing whether the language *is or is not*, in itself a defining trait of national identity, of knowing whether there is any *essential* correspondence between this criterion and others when delimiting the space of the nation. What can be done is to observe whether, and in what sense, language has functioned and functions in this way: to thus examine the workings of “the intimate relationship between language and nationality, which indeed in Europe prevails in both the naive approach of the common man and the thought-out projects of politicians”, as Carl Buck wrote ninety years ago now. That is the question, and it is one whose contents and effects evidently affect us right now.

I shall not be revealing any great secret if I say that the debate that has been occupying the press, civic bodies and the government and opposition parties over the last few months (the debate on the official nature of Catalan in the European Union Institutions, and on the old “dispute” about Valencian-Catalan) is not only a debate on language but about something more than that: everyone believes, whether they say so or not, that “recognising” this language also means recognising that there is a people, country or nation, or set of countries, which have this language as their own national tongue. This is a relationship believed in similarly by statesmen and common people, *ingénues* or ideologists: they believe it because, either openly or not, they think that *speaking is being*. They might think so in a tolerant and polite way, or as forthrightly as that slogan or exhortation that used to be found around here not so long ago, and which depending on how, often seems to still circulate: “If you’re Spanish, speak Spanish!”. This slogan implies that someone who *is* has to *speak*, and that someone who does not speak is not; or at least “is” not in such a genuine and full way as those who “speak”. Just the same today as always, when it comes down to the truths of the heart —which has its own reasons— Castilian-speaking Spaniards do not believe that the Catalans, who do not speak like the rest, are Spanish *like the rest*. Alfred de Musset, a romantic poet, put this categorically

and perfectly: “Only someone who knows, speaks and reads the French language is really French”. The terrible question is, if they did not know nor speak nor read the Spanish language, would Catalans be considered Spanish in body and soul, from head to foot? And Alsatians, in an equivalent situation?

This is not only a question of poets: soon after Alsace had been annexed to the dominions of Louis XIV, Colbert was already sending letters with instructions to teach French to everyone, above all in the schools, “so that they forget German” and become proper Frenchmen. It makes no difference whether these are subjects of the monarchy or citizens of the republic: just over a century after Colbert, the Revolution would justify *linguistic terror* (real terror, with prison sentences, destitutions from posts and deportations) for the sake of efficiency, democracy and people’s participation. The problem of understanding the laws and decrees of Paris —for almost half the population of France who did not speak French— could be solved in a very simple way: by translating. An elementary solution, which was however violently rejected. Why? Because it was not a matter of making citizens, but of making *French* citizens. When Barère affirmed in 1794, at the Public Health Committee: “Chez un peuple libre, la langue doit être une et la même pour tous”, it means that he did not think for a moment that there could be more than one *people* within the Republic, because it is totally evident that in France there could only be Frenchmen. And recognising that peoples who do not speak French have the right to speak something else would be tantamount to admitting that they were entitled to *be* something else. “Il est certain que c’est la langue qui fait la patrie”, in the words of a M. Vaublanc, Moselle prefect at the time. And hence there could not be *diverse* languages in *one* country. *Liberty* obviously had nothing to do with it, and for the following two centuries, the dogma of the Trinity, “France, the French people, French”, three concepts and a single substance, would be an immutable doctrine of faith... although faith continued to be laic. In 1925, the minister of education, Anatole de Monzie, penned this precious idea in a circular in which he banned the teaching of any *regional language*: “The lay ideal... would not be capable of harmonising rival tongues with the French language, the jealous cult for which will never have enough altars”. A *lay* ideal, with all its cults and altars to an implacable jealous divinity not tolerating any rivals! And so things go on eighty years later in our lovely France, fatherland of human rights and liberties. It is therefore not in the least surprising that any French government should look with little sympathy on the formal presence of Catalan, not only in its own territory, but in the European Union institutions: who knows if the example of an official language without a state (and according to them, also without a nation) might arouse intolerable comparisons among the Britons or the Alsatians, for example? It was indeed that same ministerial circular which quotes as supreme argument Musset’s words according to which the language and essence of the French are one and the same thing: a metaphysical and poetical idea which —if expressed by a French (or Spanish, or Italian, Hungarian, Swedish or Portuguese) poet or minister— proves unquestionable and beautiful, but if expressed by a Catalan intellectual or politician will mean they are immediately accused of displaying essentialist nationalism, or something worse.

Concepts and metaphors like this are not just the product of the most extreme political or romantic nationalism, far from it. They already circulated among the enlightened, and are a very old and well-accredited resource: “With language the heart of a people

has been created”, said Herder. And it is very well known that a people has a normally exclusive, more or less pure and powerful, more or less great or indestructible *spirit*; a fact or phenomenon not subject to empirical verification, but not detracting from any of its weight or effectiveness for that reason: a good deal of European —and not just European— national and nationalist ideologies, of the last century and a half have been founded on faith in the existence of a certain spirit (with that very successful word *Volksggeist*, as it used to be called by the German enlightened and romantics). There is only a very short distance to go from this to thinking that for each people “its language is its spirit and its spirit is its language”, as Humboldt wrote. All in all, the belief expressed by Humboldt does not have any more empirical basis than the very existence of spirits, but this does not matter: the important thing is that ideologists, politicians, writers, professors and educated people in general firmly believe in national spirits (when they deny this faith, they merely believe it under another denomination) and in their association with respective languages. This is heightened if such a belief does not come forward as stemming from metaphysics, but supposedly as something observable. This is part of general culture and in very serious books things like this can be read: “the soul and qualities of a people react on the language which is its organ and that this adapts to its own image: flexible and orientated towards analysis such as Greek, synthetic and strictly ordered such as Latin, impressive and rough like German, precise and logical like French, energetic and concentrated like Spanish, musical and clear like Italian, brief like English...” (Albert Dauzat, *L'Europe linguistique*). Let us forget the usual clichés, which were bound to include the elegant precision of French, the musicality of Italian or the forcefulness of Spanish. Let us also ignore that idea that different languages could be more or less appropriate for certain intellectual or aesthetic operations. There is a central idea, that peoples have a spirit, and that language is the organ that displays and expresses this. When you stop to consider it, the things that we manage to believe prove really surprising. But it is this faith which to a large extent leads to the conviction, power and emotion with which large or small states manage to demand (and even consider natural, and thus unrelinquishable) the formal presence of their language in international bodies such as those of the European Union today; if Slovakian or Lithuanian were not *recognised* there, this would mean that Slovakia or Lithuania would not get any recognition for all that is most intimate and consubstantial for them.



The truth is that those supposed virtues of language as a manifestation of the collective spirit are precisely the ones that can be used to *oppose* —that is, distinguish— one “spirit” from another one, one people from another people: who does not know that the French spirit is logical and precise, and that the French *therefore* speak with logical and precise language? And who could be unaware that the Catalans are straightforward people, that go in for hard work, and their language is thus efficient with short words, saying things with a much lower consumption of syllables than Castilian Spanish? This was explained as long ago as by Saint Vicent Ferrer: “The Castilians are very talkative: Ferran Ferrandec of the Arcos de los Mayores...”. Our apologists of language in the 18th century already set to work making statements of this kind.

What matters above all is that the belief in these correlations between language and the hypothetical spirit, whatever their aim or reality may be, has a very effective function as regards the group consciousness: the function of contrast, opposition: we speak this way *because* we are that and the others speak differently *because* they are different, something else. Without this identity or identifying vision, it would be hard

to understand the insistence of European states (the large ones, but also and above all the small ones) on having their own national language accepted as international, or the reticence or resistance of the same states when recognising an equivalent status for the languages of the “minorities” said or considered to be regional: in this field, as in certain others, politics stems from faith.

We ought to remember that *speaking is being* for this so commonly found faith, and we referred to French national ideology as a perfect expression of the deliberate imposition of this identity principle. This is however a principle that can be seen from a different perspective: that of the historical processes in which *speaking* has for a long time been the only or the main way to preserve *being*. I am referring, of course, to the societies which have set themselves up in modern times as political communities —national communities, and possibly states— above all from their survival as linguistic communities... and of the awareness of unity and distinction retrieved on the basis of that survival. We could mention cases such as those of Slovakia or Slovenia, Romania, Macedonia, Estonia or Latvia, of the peoples who have been said to be “peoples without history” (without any autonomous political history over recent centuries), but who were nevertheless peoples *with a language*. What about Lithuania, with a glorious historical and territorial history under this denomination, but where the historical name covered regions that are mostly Ukrainian or Byelorussian, and with Russian and Polish, successively, as educated and public language? In the mid 19th century, Lithuanian was only the language of the peasants in a few Baltic counties, but thanks to this language the Lithuanian nationality survived when these counties, in the Russians’ or Prussians’ power were the sole testimony of the former sway and ancient glory of the Lithuanians. In Estonia, not to leave the Baltic, the (scanty) urban population spoke German, Yiddish

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or Russian, and only started to think of itself as a possible nation when the “intellectuals” discovered that the strange tongue spoken by the peasants was a real language, a sister or cousin of Finnish. An observation of this aspect and dimension of the history of Europe leads to a coincidence almost without any exceptions: it is difficult for there to be a “national question” without there also being a “linguistic question”. And vice versa, seldom is there a conflict of languages which is not or does not become or express a conflict of a national nature: of societies in all cases wishing to assert themselves (often *against* another society) as culture communities: societies in most cases also wishing to assert themselves as political communities. In this field, languages are not “innocent” nor neutral. And governments’ decisions are even less neutral and innocent.

We should remember that national ideologies always look inwards, but they also look outwards, and include a universal perspective. If consistent they include the project of assuring a “place in the sun” for the people, guaranteeing them their right to take “a place amongst the peoples of the world”. It thus implies conceiving the world —humanity— as consisting of, and spread or spreadable among a number of societies, peoples, nations, of the same or equivalent status. And it thus presupposes the definition of the people or nation itself as an equal member, *de facto* or *de iure*, of this universal status. External acknowledgement of this existence, in theory political, has to go along, when this is the case, with recognition of the historical, ethno-cultural and if possible linguistic distinction; that is, of the projection of those traits which make the nation what it is and not something else, the traits that constitute its “distinction”. When the nation (generally meaning the state, but not always) cannot affirm its own distinction with its own distinctive language (because this is shared: Austrian German) they obviously do not insist on language as a factor of singularity. When they have more than one, and none is particular to them and exclusive, they will not insist on this either: in a case like that of Belgium, because it is not even certain if both linguistic communities form the same nation, either cultural or political: in the case of Switzerland, because the political nation (a very real cohesion) has not been formed on the cultural or linguistic basis, and because none of the languages was seen as *the* national language. But these are very exceptional cases. The “rule” is that all nationalisms (ideologies, social movements, projects or political actions from power or towards power) have placed language in first and eminent place among the combination of particular and distinctive traits which need to be consolidated inwardly and ensured recognition outwardly.

Amongst other reasons, this has been done that way because there is no European national ideology able to conceive its own people as a recent creation, subjective and arbitrary, the mere effect of accidents of history. Outside Europe, where the states more or less self-defined as nations are often precisely the product of accidents of history, national ideologies make strange adaptations and connections to inquire into what way, and since when, for example, a Mexican or Paraguayan or Senegalese people has existed. But within Europe, and practically in all cases, national ideologies firmly maintain that the modern nation is the result and the continuation of the real existence of an ancient people (even in cases such as Belgium and Switzerland; were there not peoples known as the *Belgae* and the *Helvetii* in Julius Caesar’s time?). In that case there is no more effective and visible argument than language (obviously when this is one’s own and distinctive, that is, in almost all cases) to ground this continuing and ancient reality: if five or seven or ten

centuries ago, *there was already* a different language, this means that *there was already* a different people existing there. And if in this 19th or 20th or 21st century the language *still* exists, this means that there is still a people: continuity has not dissolved, we are the same as we were; perhaps not identical to those before, but the same people. The moderate part of fantasy that this belief presupposes does not detract one whit from its effectiveness or mobilising power, quite the opposite. Neither does it detract any “moral” power from the argument that says: we exist and we have a language, we are a “country with a language”, and since we want to be known and recognised as a people or country, we also want our language to be known and recognised. Because if our language is not recognised, it means that we are not recognised as a country. Presenting oneself towards the outside *with* one’s own language (*idiom* in Greek means just that: ‘one’s own thing’) is the other side of the correlation between nation and language, because before or at the same time, one has to make oneself or remake oneself within and through language.

It is precisely when the danger of a break in continuity with the past, the danger of ceasing to be what one was or imagined one was, is perceived that nationalist groups, whether these are just starting to emerge or already developed, link the project of national preservation with a linguistic project. *Authenticity* and *unity*, aims of any nationalism, will also be the objectives of any programme which attempts to affirm, or recover, the status of *national* for its own language. In such a programme “national” means a relationship between language and society in which the latter considers and esteems the former as the only one effectively identified as its own. All the national societies of contemporary Europe—all the peoples-with-a-language—with a state or aspirations to some form of state, have had a “programme” of this sort, at least since the end of the 18th century, and even more so during the 19th and 20th centuries. In its most elaborate form, the objectives are always the same: a *unified* language, more or less with the features that we would now call a basic common and accepted standard, against the dangers of disintegration; a language *purified* of everything that is not authentic, of foreign bodies, everything which is seen as contaminating, alien, adhered and so on; and an effectively *national and particular* language, which occupies or reoccupies all the spaces that the language not of one’s own, that of another nation, has succeeded in occupying. One should point out that as a general rule this project is not a “peaceful” project, meaning that it does not work without external or internal resistance. Resistance of the language that has to be displaced, resistance of German in Bohemia, failing and with complete final displacement; resistance of Spanish in the Catalan Countries, with very considerable success up to now; resistance of English in Ireland with almost perfect success... Or endogenous resistance to a unifying standard: the secular conflict between *Landsmal* and *Riksmal* and its derivatives in Norway or between *katharevousa* and *demotiki* in Greece, the regional ill feeling against *euskera batua*, the up to now impossible reunification of Galician with Portuguese, the fuss with more or less substance about *català* and *valencià*...

This accepted codification or standard is not only, when this has not been attained, a first rank strategic objective for a society’s affirmation of national culture. Its very existence and influence also make it a decisive influence in the formation of that society. When Slovakian Catholic clergy, from the 17th century, spread religious literature in the country’s language, they were laying the foundations that would turn a Czech dialect into an independent literary language, so that later on the resistance to Magyarisation

(when Slovakia was included in the kingdom of Hungary) did not give rise to a Panbohemian nationalism, as they forecast in Prague, but to an autonomous affirmation of the Slovak nation. In Holland the autonomous historical course, the independent political affirmation of the urban bourgeoisie (the United Provinces are the only territory to remain outside the bounds of the Empire from the 16th century), meant that just

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another variety of Low German became a formal, literary language and autonomous standard: the opposition between standard Low German and dominant high German became conscious and nationally effective only in Holland, as far as becoming opposition between *Dutch* and *German*. The opposition of peoples and languages had only previously been seen between “Latin” and Germanic countries:

“Kerstenheit es gedeelt in twee:/ die Walsche tonge die es een,/ d’andere die Dietsche al geheel” (“Christendom is split into two: the Romance language is one part, and the other Germany as a whole”), wrote Dutch poet Jan van Boendale in the 14th century. For centuries Serbo-Croatian, a language with a composite name, has, as is well known, used a dual script: Cyrillic in orthodox Serbia and Roman in Catholic Croatia, and during the supposedly happy times of a Yugoslavia made up of more or less reconciled people—the times of Josip Broz, Tito—the duality of writing was no hindrance for growing rapprochement, as a result of which everyone considered that this was ultimately a single language, and eventually the Serbs increasingly used Roman script (I observed this in the eighties in Belgrade). The disintegration of the federation, the bloody conflict, the renewal of ancient hatred, have made Serbs and Croats (and their governments, schools, books and newspapers) now claim that they speak different languages, without realising that the common name could hardly work in Bosnia as it used to work before. To make an awful comparison: if Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia join the European Union one day (it will take time but they *will* join), will they come in with three languages and two alphabets?

The examples could go on and on without leaving Europe and will all have a common denominator, which is the close relationship between language and politics, between language and power, between the existence of an “educated” language and its institutional status (as a reality or as a project), and between this status and its interior and exterior affirmation. The social and political “status” of language —“higher” than the lower one of dialect, as everyone knows— is not something that depends on the distinctions of philological science, but on the existence and effective dissemination of an autonomous codification: people perceive that they have their own language when they know and accept that there is a model of *language* for their *speech*. This is not exactly a matter of *parole* and *langue*, but of the existence of a model seen as correct, literary, formal and if possible institutional, considered one’s own and corresponding to one’s own language. Then this reference attains a highly efficient symbolic value, becomes proof and representation of the autonomy and individuality of the language and (in the case

of a language that is or is considered to be exclusive) a mechanism for affirmation and reinforcement of the different identity of the people, citizens or country speaking this. Hence languages, very particularly in Europe, do not have only a functional-rational value as an instrument or vehicle for communication, as some affirm, furthermore very much in their own interests (going by this value, the “smaller” languages would easily be relinquishable, in favour of the bigger ones... and that is really what they mean). I am not talking about language in general, but of *that* particular language, which, when seen as codified and educated, and above all when seen as being acknowledged from outside, becomes to some extent a symbol of itself: *educated* and recognised language —rules, literature, institutionalisation and so on— *represents* a different language, a “higher category” of language, with value and dignity equal to other languages. Indeed, the perception of this recognised “equal dignity” is essential for effective perception of the “particular dignity” of the group, society or country which speaks this, and essential for the cohesion and adhesion mechanisms to work: it is not easy to adhere to or be faithful to something —a language or human group— which is seen as inferior and lower in value. And “value” and dignity are not only results of knowledge, but of acknowledgement: being a language or culture invited to international book fairs (in Turin, Guadalajara or Frankfurt), being translated into many other languages, being taught in foreign universities... or being recognised as a language of the European Union. Because the nation itself and its own people, the basic identity group of which people form part, cannot be seen as unworthy of being known and acknowledged as equals... without entailing the danger of one of the many forms of collective schizophrenia or alienation, or any of the multiple symptoms of disappearance through dissolution. Neither can one’s own language be seen as inferior, clumsy, unworthy of acknowledgement... without a risk of general depression or being abandoned at the first opportunity or coercion. As Meillet himself affirmed, “une langue ne subsiste que misérablement là où elle n’est pas soutenue par un sentiment national”. And this is also the modern history of Europe, from Estonia to Portugal and from Sweden to Greece. For this reason comparisons are so detestable, and for this reason, if speaking a language involves much more than speaking, acknowledging one also means much more than acknowledging a language II