

What is in a language?

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Language borders: too self-evident or too hazy?

Since the late 20th century, in the humanities an actional or constructionist turn can be observed. Instead of supra-individual abstract entities, researchers are focusing on how they are constructed by the actions and interactions of individuals. Gender is not just a socio-cultural category to which people belong but something that is constantly being reproduced and performed.¹ Instead of assuming an institutional role in a community, such as the role of a healer, a person is 'producing healerhood'.² Instead of 'music' or 'language', researchers speak of 'musicking'³ and 'linguaging'.⁴

Questioning the naturalness of supra-individual categories means shedding light on the power structures behind them. This is most eloquently shown by the debates concerning the purported 'gender ideology' in Central and Eastern Europe.⁵ But this criticism does not only question the 'God-given' genesis of categories in themselves but also the nature of their boundaries. Instead of operating with languages as entities with clear borders, linguists may claim that languages are socio-political constructs and their borders are nationalist or colonialist artefacts, or even that dividing the diversity of

¹ The idea of gender performativity, most famously connected with the work of Judith Butler (see e.g. Butler 1990), of course goes beyond individual agency.

² '*Tuottaa parantajuutta*' is the Finnish expression used in Piela 2005.

³ The term *musicking* was coined by the ethnomusicologist and music educator Christopher Small (1998), to denote a person's taking part, 'in any capacity, in a musical performance'. It is now widely used in musicology.

⁴ The term *linguaging* is used in a variety of meanings, from cognitive processes of encoding things with language (in applied linguistics, see e.g. Swain 2006) to 'a cover term for activities involving language' (Love 2017).

⁵ A particularly insightful analysis is Grzebalska et al. 2017.

language varieties into separate languages represents ‘epistemic violence’.⁶

In the research of modern and urban multilingualism in particular, it has become customary to focus on the fluidity of intertwining language resources or the ‘polylinguaging’ of modern multilinguals and to emphasize that multilingual language competence does not mean simply parallel monolingualisms⁷. This is an issue with direct significance for educational policies, particularly considering the intensifying public discourse around immigration.

At the same time, covert monolingual ideologies live on, not only in the education system but also in the emancipation of minority varieties⁸. Even though practically all language minorities in today’s Europe are multilingual, the ethnolinguistic assumption – the idea that each ethnic identity is essentially connected to one certain language and vice versa – is still present both in minority activism and in legislation.⁹ In fact, it is very difficult to assess the multilingualism of modern Europeans without resorting to concepts drawing on a monolingual framework, starting with the problematic idea of ‘mother tongue’.

Language(s) or dialect(s)?

According to the lay view popular in many European countries, a language corresponds to a ‘state’ or a ‘nation’ in the French and Anglophone meaning of the word¹⁰. This is shown not only in populist discourse (‘we are in X-land now, speak X-ish or go away!’), but also by simple gestures such as the marking of languages with miniature flags

⁶ Makoni & Pennycook 2007.

⁷ See Jørgensen 2008.

⁸ See e.g. Dufva et al. 2011.

⁹ For discussion of/a survey of the ethnolinguistic assumption, see Blommaert et al 2012; for discussions of minority activism and legislation, see e.g. Laakso et al. 2016, 10, 211.

¹⁰ Note that there is a difference between the French and Anglophone understanding of ‘nation’ and the Romantic idea – still widespread in Germany and Eastern Europe – of defining ‘nation’ on the basis of ethnicity. See Sériot 2014.

in multilingual user interfaces etc. It is well known that this view comes with numerous problems, not only for multilingual individuals but also for diverse minorities and diaspora groups.

The well-established lay view equating language with state implies that a 'dialect' can even be incompatible with the cultivation of the ideal national language. In many European countries, national language projects have given rise to a general anti-dialect attitude or even dialecticidal practices. (To quote an example from a Hungarian school: children who said something 'incorrectly' had a big red tongue hung around their neck; the child punished in this way had to wear the tongue emblem until it could be passed on to the next child who was caught using dialectal or incorrect language.)¹¹ A 'dialect', in this lay view, is something inferior to 'language': it is less developed, less regular ('dialects don't have grammar'), and it should only be used in the private sphere or in folkloristic and artistic contexts, often as a vehicle of humour.

Against this background, it is no wonder that many minority varieties of state languages, previously regarded as 'dialects', may now seek emancipation by declaring themselves as 'real' languages in the proper sense of the word. Further political motivation can arise from the fact that these language varieties are sometimes spoken by people who do not identify themselves with the nation-state of the *Ausbauvarietät*. The Germanic-speaking people in French Alsace do not necessarily consider themselves Germans, and Corsicans are not Italians in the state-affiliation sense of the word. Also the Meänkieli speakers (Tornedal Finns) in North Sweden have throughout their history been subjects of the King of Sweden, never really participating in the emancipation of Finnish and the national language planning in Finland in the 19th century. Nevertheless, there are also expatriate varieties which – due to well-known historical reasons – still mostly identify themselves with and comply to the standard of the 'motherland'. Hungarian trans-border minorities are an excellent

¹¹ Sándor 2014, 421–422.

example of this, despite interesting parallels with some new languages in the process of emancipation.¹²

The border between 'language' and 'dialect' is often fuzzy and contested. Actually, it is a question of politics and identity rather than linguistics, and there are no water-proof linguistic criteria. Linguists know this all too well, and therefore they often emphasize that such decisions must be made by the speakers themselves, or explicitly speak for pluralistic and pluricentric solutions. These, in turn, are not always palatable for the speakers themselves, who are often educated and socialized to believe in 'languageness', the idea of language as a clearly demarcated entity. And sometimes such speakers may even find linguist allies to support these ideas. A particularly illustrative case is the recent debate on the revitalization of Karelian in Finland.

Karelian, the closest sister language of Finnish, has traditionally been spoken on both sides of the Finnish-Russian border. On the Finnish side, most Karelian speakers lived until World War II in the easternmost corner of the country, the so-called Border Karelia. As these areas were ceded to the Soviet Union, their inhabitants were evacuated and resettled in other parts of Finland. Karelian therefore has no 'home region' in today's Finland, and its status was long contested. Only in 2010 did Finland officially, albeit indirectly acknowledge Karelian as a minority language: Karelian was added to the decree which defines those languages in Finland to which the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages applies. During the last couple of decades, some revitalization activities have been launched. In this connection, however, a new conflict has arisen.

Spoken in a large area, Karelian is divided into clearly different dialects. In addition to Lude, also considered a separate language, linguists have traditionally distinguished between Karelian Proper and Olonets or Livvi Karelian. Livvi and Lude are clearly connected to Veps, the easternmost Finnic language: they probably came into being as a result of early contacts between the proto-forms of Karelian

¹² For a comparison of language ideologies among the Transylvanian and Csángó Hungarian minorities and the Tornedalians of Sweden, see Molnár Bodrogi 2015.

Proper and Veps.¹³ Since the late 1980s, Livvi has had a strong position in the revitalization activities of Karelian on the Russian side of the border, whereas the neighbouring southern dialects of Karelian Proper have received far less attention and their written cultivation is lagging behind. In Finnish pre-war Border Karelia, both Livvi and Karelian Proper were spoken, and this has made the choice of the standard variety a key issue in the revitalization of Karelian in Finland.

The conflict has arisen among some speakers of Karelian Proper dialects or their representatives, most notably between some activists of the Suojärvi Society (an organization of evacuees from the pre-war parish of Suojärvi and their descendants) and KKS or the Society for the Karelian Language (a Finnish NGO). The Suojärvi Society is accusing KKS of usurping the fairly modest funding now granted for the revitalization of Karelian, since most of the recent publications of KKS have appeared in Livvi Karelian only. This regrettable conflict is, of course, not untypical: instead of concerted action, linguistic minorities may get immersed into internal fights for resources. From the point of view of an outsider linguist, the most interesting aspect is how a linguist with strong categorical views on historical linguistics and language taxonomy has been drawn into this conflict.

In 2017, the gazette of the Suojärvi Society published an article by Tapani Salminen, an accomplished linguist best known as an expert in Samoyedic (in particular, the phonological analysis of Nenets), who has also published extensively about language endangerment and on taxonomic issues.¹⁴ In this paper, Salminen claims that the Livvi varieties do not even belong to Karelian and that by promoting the cultivation of Livvi, the KKS is illegitimately usurping the resources that should be allocated for Karelian.

Historical linguistics can, in a sense, provide legitimation for Salminen's claim: the genealogical lineage of Livvi Karelian really differs from that of Karelian Proper. From the point of view of language sociology, however, Salminen's claim does not make sense. Despite

¹³ See Itkonen 1971. Recently, Pahomov (2017) has argued that Lude has early on constituted an independent language early on and that the 'Veps' component in Livvi more probably comes from Early Lude.

¹⁴ Salminen 2017.

their genealogically different origins reflected in certain indexical phonological features (such as the word-final *-u/-y* in Livvi instead of *-a/-ä* in certain word types), the Livvi and Karelian Proper varieties spoken in pre-war Border Karelia were very close to each other, their speakers shared an ethnocultural identity most markedly expressed by their Orthodox religion, and due to intermarriages, there were families in which both varieties or admixtures of them were spoken. In fact, the Finnish Border Karelian dialects had a strongly mixed character.¹⁵ Emphasizing the border between Livvi and Karelian Proper not only runs counter to the well-established taxonomy in Finnic linguistics, it is also incompatible with the self-image of many speakers and counterproductive for the revitalization activities.

The moral of the story?

In pre-modern multilingual regimes, defining and demarcating languages was not an essential issue.¹⁶ In Mediaeval Europe, below the highest Latin-language stratum, numerous vernacular varieties were used in everyday communication, often in free combinations and admixtures. The standardization of spoken vernaculars into national languages, together with the ethnolinguistic assumption and monolingual ideologies, profoundly changed the way people thought about language and languages. Moreover, these standardization projects in many European countries coincided with the professionalization of linguistics and tempted both linguists and laymen to see language as an idealized, homogeneous entity with clear boundaries – even if linguists have always known that this was only a methodologically conditioned idealization covering the reality of endless diversity.¹⁷

The problems – even including language endangerment and linguisticide – which monolingualist national language policies have caused for numerous minorities are now widely known and discussed all

¹⁵ Koivisto 2018.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Braunmüller 2008.

¹⁷ “In Wirklichkeit werden in jedem Augenblicke innerhalb einer Volksgemeinschaft so viele Dialekte geredet als redende Individuen vorhanden sind, [...]. Dialektspaltung bedeutet nichts anderes als das Hinauswachsen der individuellen Verschiedenheiten über ein gewisses Mass.” Paul 1920, 38.

around the world. Less attention has been paid to the question of demarcating the languages at issue. Which language varieties are 'real languages', which ones are 'just dialects', what is the difference between these two and who is entitled to draw the border? How can the ethnolinguistic assumption, essential for many linguistic emancipation projects, be reconciled with tolerance towards diversity? How can different varieties of a small minority language be justly and equally promoted, as in the case of Karelian in Finland? Or how can national language planning both support a clearly demarcated standard (in a prescriptivist tradition, of which Hungary is a good example) and celebrate the diversity of dialects (e.g. the lip service to 'regional language use' in the national curriculum or even the suggestions to include protection of dialects into the constitution of Hungary¹⁸)?

Creating just and sustainable language policies in our globalized multilingual world requires individually tailored solutions. This, in turn, needs expertise: not only directly, in language policy planning by linguists, but also indirectly, in how linguists educate language professionals and political decision-makers to understand the complexity of what makes a language.

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¹⁸ Kontra & Cseresnyési 2011, 77.

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