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## Languages, Nations and Identities

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### Abstract

This article reviews a range of ways in which issues of national identity have been shown to be linked with the topic of language. We suggest that there is scope for development both of the theoretical underpinning to claims made about the nature of these links, and also, in consequence, to the methodological approaches appropriate to empirical investigations of them. Here, we explore the ways in which aspects of the social world such as those summarised above are understood theoretically. The first part of the paper argues that debates about the relationship of languages to forms of social identity, particularly those associated with nationalisms, often make a number of assumptions - about languages, about collectivities and about social agency. The second part interrogates these assumptions and proposes the utility of realist theory in evaluating claims in this area. In the final part of the paper, we outline the methodological implications of our argument.

### Introduction

In this paper, we review a range of ways in which issues of national identity have been shown to be linked with the topic of language. These links are summarised by Wright (1994: 3), who comments on:

... the dynamic role language plays as a unifying factor in maintaining national identity. Questions of linguistic identity, of linguistic exclusion or inclusion, of languages in contact, of languages in conflict, of language purity, of language conservation, of language prestige, are all central to the process.

We suggest that there is scope for development both of the theoretical underpinning to claims made about the nature of these links, and also, in consequence, to the methodological approaches appropriate to empirical investigations of them. Our concern in this paper, then, is to explore a little more closely some of the ways in which aspects of the social world such as those summarised above are understood theoretically. The first part of the paper argues that debates about the relationship of languages to forms of social identity, particularly those associated with nationalisms, often make a number of assumptions - about languages, about collectivities and about social agency. The second part interrogates these assumptions and proposes the utility of realist theory in evaluating claims in this area. In the final part of the paper, we outline the methodological implications of our argument.

### **Some assumptions about languages**

Commonsense classifications of languages represent them as distinct entities. Language teaching syllabuses assume a 'target language' as a largely unproblematic entity, and for everyday purposes speakers assume shared understanding when discussing whether they do or do not speak 'English', 'French' or 'Russian' and so on. These commonsense notions acquire practical significance when they become institutionalised in official policies, including at the level of national and international government and legislation. For example, the European Union currently identifies 20 'official languages'. This list includes both Czech and Slovak, appearing thereby merely to provide labels for two of the specific language varieties used by its citizens. From a strictly linguistic point of view, however, these manifestations of the universal human capacity for language are 'adjacent in the Slavonic dialect continuum and thus their speakers could imagine themselves part of a single community of communication if they so wished,' (Wright 2000: 52). In other words this classificatory division is a matter of political choice rather than linguistic necessity; instead of realising the possibility of a common language, those with responsibility for, and influence over, language policy seek to develop two distinct languages.

Another example is provided by the varieties Hindi, Urdu and Panjabi, of which Schiffman (1996: 65) notes, 'scholars familiar with the area know that the linguistic differences between these codes are minimal, if perceptible at all'. Likewise, of five countries identified as 'Northern Europe', Vikør writes, 'in all of them a distinct language is considered crucial to national identity,' and yet the varieties Swedish, Danish and Norwegian '... are mutually intelligible, at least when there is a will to understand on the part of the interlocutors' (2000: 105-6). The arbitrariness (linguistically speaking), or the expediency (from a political point of view) of demarcating varieties in such contexts is replicated many times over in the history of the practice of labelling languages, which helps to contribute to the widespread belief that they are distinct, bounded entities.

A second assumption which we believe is influential in various practices in the contemporary social world is that languages embody significant elements of national cultures and are linked to territorial units. This is a theme which dates back to the rise of nationalism, when unified states were forged from fragmented communities and medieval kingdoms (Mar-Molinero 2000). Examples of the articulation of the link between linguistic and national unity include, among many others: Webster's efforts to distinguish American English from British English after independence (Crowley 1991); the discourse of the 'Youth Oath' of 1928 in Indonesia, which proposed the idea of a free nation based on the principles of 'one archipelago, one nation, one language'; the deployment by Kemal Atatürk of the Turkish language in the project of establishing the country as a political and social unity (Lewis 2002); and so on. Contemporary research suggests that belief in what Kaplan et al (2000: 2) refer to as 'the "one-nation-one-language" myth' is still fairly ubiquitous. Carli et al (2003), for example, interviewed informants from six European border communities, and found that they justified their evaluations of individual languages 'through apparently rational arguments' which drew on 'the "one nation, one language" principle'. Judge (2000: 44) opines that '[t]he premiss "one state, one nation, one language" seems an obvious one to the vast majority of French people ...'; Schmid (2001) maintains that '[t]he notion of "one nation, one language" is part of the idealized history of the United States,' (although, as she points out, 'in its short history it has probably been host to more bilingual people than any other country in the world'), and there are numerous other examples in the literature. The English language represents a particularly interesting case, in that it is spoken far more widely as an additional language than as a 'mother tongue' (Graddol 1997), and yet it is nevertheless commandeered for nation-unifying work in the UK, as is demonstrated by recent policies on immigration and citizenship, with their English-language test component.

### **Some assumptions about collectivities**

It is obvious that for languages to play the role they do in 'one-language, one-nation' ideologies, there needs to be a correspondingly taken-for-granted concept of how individuals cohere as collectivities.

An obvious candidate is the notion of the nation, and language has been an important tool in promulgating the existence of nations, distinguishing those who 'belong' from those who do not.

To take one specific example from recent history, in Estonia (which gained independence from the USSR in 1991), the Language Law of 1989 made Estonian the state language, despite the fact that 34% of Estonians were Russian speaking; Latvia and Lithuania took similar decisions. Citizenship became dependent on a linguistic qualification, with the requirement to sit examinations and reach an assessed level of competence; a 5-year residency qualification is waived for those fluent in Estonian (Rannut 2004). The aim is to regain monolingualism in Estonian within a generation (Wright 2000: 55). Accounts of the history of nationalism expose 'the element of artifact, invention and social engineering which enters into the making of nations' (Hobsbawm 1990: 10), a process which Hobsbawm insists should be viewed thus: 'for the purposes of analysis nationalism comes before nations. Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round' (ibid.). As has been illustrated above, the ideology of 'one-language, one-nation' is a powerful one, and variations and extensions of it are used by opponents of repressive and nationalistic political forces as well as by their proponents.

Currently, it is commonalities of 'culture' or 'ethnicity' that are perhaps more fashionable than those of 'nation', a development expressed and reinforced by current debates about multiculturalism. The term 'multiculturalism' implies that there are different cultures to be managed or accommodated; Samuel Huntington's (1993) 'clash of civilizations' thesis posits a struggle between a 'Western' and an 'Islamist-Confucianist' tradition, whilst current anxieties about refugees and asylum seekers in Europe are frequently expressed in terms of integration, community cohesion and conflicting cultural norms and mores.

Tussles over the boundaries of collectivities – including the classification of 'minorities' – often run parallel with those about languages. In the European Union there are currently some 36 languages which are considered to be 'regional or minority' (Wright 2004), and a large number of enterprises aimed at supporting them, usually as a component of the quest for recognition, and sometimes for political self-determination, of various groups distinguishing themselves from 'national' majorities. Across the globe, the rapidly changing patterns of settlement, migration, technology and trade are leading to the loss of numerous language varieties with very small numbers of speakers. Crystal (2002) estimates that on average a language 'dies' every two weeks, and there are popular movements to try to halt the decline in linguistic diversity. The arguments put forward routinely link language with tradition and identity: 'Speakers of an endangered language may well resist the extinction of their traditions, and of their linguistic identity. They have every right to do so,' (Manifesto of the Foundation for Endangered Languages). One result of the linking of language and identity in this way is that the conceptual link between 'a people' and 'a language' is routinely reinforced. It is our contention that the theories underlying this readily-assumed linkage warrant scrutiny, given the evidence that politicians, language planners, academic researchers and champions of 'minority language rights' share much common ground in this respect. In many of the discourses where debates about language and identity feature, 'nations' may well be represented as exclusive, homogenising and oppressive. By contrast, inclusivity, pluralism and progressive policies tend to deploy the concept of 'ethnicity'. Yet the claims for a link between language and identity are made in strikingly similar terms. To take just two examples, here is a nationalist politician making an emotive plea for a particular group to value 'its' language:

The Turkish language is one of the most beautiful, rich and easy languages in the world. Therefore, every Turk loves his language and makes an effort to elevate its status. The Turkish language is also a sacred treasure for the Turkish nation because the Turkish nation knows that its moral values, customs, memories, interests, in short, everything that makes it a nation was preserved through its language. (Atatürk, quoted in Virtanen 2003: 13).

And here are two scholars contributing to one of the burgeoning crop of books and articles on 'language and ethnic identity':

In sub-Saharan Africa, there is a strong emotional attachment to language and ethnicity. Language is seen as the storehouse of ethnicity: Each ethnic group expresses and identifies itself by the language it speaks, and its cultural paraphernalia is shaped by its language. Sameness of language and ethnicity creates a bond of acceptance and provides a basis for togetherness, for identity, for separateness, for solidarity, and for brotherhood and kinship. (Obeng and Adegbiya 2001: 353)

### **Some assumptions about social agency**

The third assumption about languages and identities that we posit is that social agency is currently expressed chiefly in cultural forms such as ethno-national identities and politics. There are two issues raised by this assumption. The first has to do with the pre-eminence given to the politics of belonging and attachment - the notion that social interests cohere primarily around the identification of communities or 'ethnies'; we consider this below. The second has to do with the notion of identity. 'Identity' is a paradoxical quality. It is inherently relational, since one's identity is defined by establishing both those whom one is like and also those from whom one wishes to be differentiated. This observation highlights the significance of individual will, of human agency in the matter of identity. However, the relational status of identity also entails a notion of community, of the others with whom one shares something in common. Depending on what it is that has to be shared for group membership to be a possibility, language may be seen as either a constituent or a marker of a group identity. In either case, language becomes tightly associated with culture, and any threat to one is inevitably perceived as a threat to the other.

### **Challenging assumptions: language, agency and identity**

The second part of the paper suggests that the assumptions outlined above have a number of shortcomings, and that these derive principally from their uncertain formulation of the relationship between structure, culture and agency. We propose that a realist ontology provides a means of avoiding the inconsistencies often associated with challenges to received wisdom about, for example, the relation between nation and language. It is a core element of our argument that the social scientific description of these phenomena is likely to entail particular kinds of conceptual categories. These conceptual categories may well differ from those used by the social actors themselves, who have very different priorities.

As will be evident by now, there are various problems with the concept of languages as discrete, separate entities. Linguists of many different persuasions have undermined the commonsense assumption that languages can be delimited easily – or even at all. For many traditionalists, the recognition that there may be a 'universal grammar' underlying actual utterances in specific varieties (postulated anyway within this Chomskyan perspective as epiphenomenal), reduces the existence of different languages to a 'convenient fiction'. More recent challenges to the notion of separate languages, including those influenced by postmodernism, have claimed that 'there is ultimately no good reason to posit their existence' (Pennycook 2006: 67). In any case, it has to be recognised that linguistic boundaries are highly porous. The examples of Czech / Slovak, Urdu / Hindi / Panjabi and Danish / Swedish / Norwegian have already been cited, but there are many others. Indeed, language varieties in most territories are best thought of as falling along a 'continuum', given that speakers are likely to understand each other across national boundaries, and may even find near neighbours along the state border easier to communicate with than fellow nationals who live further away. As Lemke (2002: 85) puts it, '[i]t is not at all obvious that if they were not politically prevented from doing so, "languages" would not mix and dissolve into one another ...'.

Thus the fact that Czech and Slovak speakers, for example, may typically choose not to engage as a single community of communication is a consequence of political decisions rather than anything inherent in the varieties themselves. As Carli et al (2003: 866) express the point (apparently accepting, as they do so, the descriptive accuracy of the phrase 'historical-natural languages'):

All historical-natural languages, considered as internal linguistic systems, display equal potentialities; the essential difference among them is given solely by their social evaluation. Thus, according to their acquired and/or ascribed degree of power, some languages tend to be considered as more 'prestigious' or 'dominant' languages, whereas others are considered rather 'stigmatised' or 'dominated' languages.

The key point is that advances over several decades in empirical and functional linguistics emphasise that language in use is dynamic, and responsive to people's need to communicate. In other words, this is an agency-driven view of language use and linguistic development in which social actors pursue projects and ambitions using language as a central resource to do so. In so doing, of course they adapt and modify the linguistic resources they inherit or encounter. Thus, speakers – including those who are either literally or metaphorically 'at the margins' of language varieties – adapt the linguistic resources available to them to serve their communicative purposes. Meanwhile, other interests may be served by exaggerating differences between these resources, sometimes to the extent of promoting one variety, from among those available within a community, as the 'standard'.

Standardisation is then a political project: it usually accompanies industrialisation, but significantly also the rise of nationalism, colonialism and imperialism (Cooper, 1989). It is frequently accompanied by efforts to establish the authenticity and 'purity' of the variety identified as 'the standard,' sometimes drawing on selective historical evidence which may be questionable, even spurious (Crowley 2003; Milroy 2002; Milroy and Milroy 1991). In particular, the establishment of bounded language varieties requires support from conscious 'language planning', and this in turn requires a state infrastructure capable of initiating and, more importantly, implementing it. Thus, while language planning may seem to be concerned with language itself, as Cooper points out:

... those definitions [of language planning] which are framed in terms of the solution of language or communication problems obscure a fundamental point about language planning, namely that it is typically, perhaps always, directed ultimately towards nonlinguistic ends. (Cooper, 1989: 35).

Against the view that languages are discrete entities, the approach proposed here suggests that the sources of linguistic change are to be found in the efforts of people to negotiate the social world. As Halliday (1978: 91 - 92) notes, '... [o]nly when we interpret language development in the context of the construction and transmission of social reality can we hope to find in it the sources and mechanisms of linguistic change'. This model of the relationship between social action and language use is what we have described elsewhere as an 'emergent' one (Sealey and Carter 2004). Briefly, in this model languages are regarded as an emergent product of the engagement of human practice with the material world. This is a view of language in which the manipulation of symbolic codes arises from the biological human capacity for language and from the material problems of human species survival; language becomes, amongst other things, an indispensable element in human survival. At the core of the emergentist approach, therefore, is an emphasis on agency, on the activities of human beings in their particular social contexts and settings.

We have already demonstrated some of the implications of this model for assumptions about language, but it also has implications for the assumptions about collectivities and social agency that we considered earlier. For example, one of the ways in which people exercise agency with regard to language use is in fashioning linguistic styles through the choices they make about which language variety to use. These choices are often interpreted as demonstrating national, ethnic or cultural affiliation. As Le Page and Tabouret-Keller have noted (1985: 181), individuals shape patterns of

linguistic behaviour 'so as to resemble those of the group or groups with which [they wish] to be identified, or so as to be unlike those from whom [they wish] to be distinguished'. This formulation highlights agency and individual choice, and points to the creative interplay between these and the emergent cultural resource of language. The term 'interplay' is significant, for although social actors can be ingenious in the fashioning of linguistic styles and varieties, they do not do so without constraint. Various social forces influence the choices available to them.

Governments exert one influence by making legislation about language, including about the way language will feature in education policies. Schooling is associated with language planning, and language planning operates at a structural level. Again, the EU provides an interesting example of the consequences of language policy, in this case operating at a supra-national level, for the linguistic resources available to social actors.

The EU, by virtue of its development as a trans-national organisation, has had to come to terms with the multilingual nature of its constituents. So from its inception, the EU has had a consistent and explicit commitment to preserving linguistic diversity within the Union. Article 217 of the EEC: Regulation 1 (1958) made the official national languages of the member states the official languages of the EEC (initially, French, Dutch, German and Italian). Article 217 also included a requirement for communications about all official business of the Community to be available in all these languages. However, as new states have joined the EU and the number of member state languages has grown, this policy has become increasingly costly and cumbersome to implement. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this systemic feature of EU language strategy has created the practical conditions for the emergence of a *lingua franca*, a common linguistic resource within which the everyday business of the EU may be carried out.

Running counter to these conditions is a simultaneous commitment, embodied in Article 22 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights (a product of the Nice Treaty of 2000), to respect for linguistic diversity. Article II-82 of the Constitution of Nice Treaty which member states were expected to adopt assertions that 'The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity'.

However, it remains the case that access to EU decision making and activities is deeply shaped by citizens' range of linguistic competence and it is these which govern their actual access to linguistic resources and therefore their capacity to realise linguistic diversity. And many EU citizens recognise that their interests are likely to be best served by investing in the costs attendant on learning the *de facto lingua franca* – English. Substantive 'inclusion' within a European polity must rest upon the creation of a viable 'community of communication'. Such a community of communication will be a product of social agency and political will, and will have to address the tension between a formal commitment to linguistic diversity and the requirement to communicate. Part of the problem faced is that language has such strong symbolic functions (supposedly embodying, as we have demonstrated, 'the spirit of the nation'), making the recognition of a European *lingua franca* (for practical / pragmatic purposes) politically explosive.

This example demonstrates the interplay between structural decisions at the policy level and social agency. In effect, people's language use in their negotiation of social life derives from a changing set of interests generated by the impact of market forces and globalisation more generally (of course, among such impacts may be an interest in linguistic diversity or, more likely perhaps, an interest in developing competence in a particular language as a means of 'getting on'). Individuals and groups may respond to structural constraints - and enablements - in a number of ways, some of which may include choosing to engage in identification with a cultural, 'ethnic' or national group. Such engagements will usually have implications for linguistic practices. However, it should be clear from the above claims about the relationship between agency and language use that there can be no simple correlation between the use of a particular language variety and 'belonging to', or identifying with, a particular group of this kind. As we have noted, globally – and within the EU – speakers of English as an additional language outnumber native speakers. This is not an indication, however, that English national identity (whatever that is) is an irresistible acquisition, merely that for many people the

benefits of competence in English greatly outweigh the costs of attaining it (although see Grin 2006 on the problems of calculating such costs accurately in monetary terms).

So far we have contended that in both popular and academic discourses about languages and social identities a number of assumptions are in play; in considering these we have suggested that they have a range of shortcomings and we have proposed an alternative realist account of the relationship between language use and social agency. In the final part of the paper we wish to consider the methodological implications of this alternative perspective.

### Methodological implications

Decisions about research methodology are inevitably made in the context of theories about the nature of what is to be researched. Throughout this paper, we have raised questions about social groups and about language varieties. We begin this section with a summary of our position on these questions.

People are born into a global system which delineates geopolitical spaces as 'nations'. This is an objective description of an aspect of human experience. How this is subjectively experienced, understood and interpreted, however, is not determined by the mere fact of being born in a certain place at a certain time. Obviously the cultural and linguistic resources available and valued in the context of this location will condition the likelihood of acquiring some language varieties rather than others, but this does not in itself lead inexorably to a national, ethnic or linguistic 'identity'. From the researcher's perspective, there is a danger that, if political communities are viewed as deriving from a shared or common cultural heritage or tradition, the political actions they take are interpreted as motivated by a shared sense of 'ethnic identity'. Political interests then become construed within that 'ethnic' framework. Conflicts may be represented as deriving from the ambition of one such group or collectivity to achieve dominance over another, whereas in fact the range of political interests involved is much more complex than this formulation allows.

There are many approaches used in the investigation of language and identity, an area that is receiving considerable attention is sociolinguistics (e.g. Dow 1991, Fishman 2001a, Harris and Rampton 2003, Wodak et al 1999, Omoniyi and White 2006). A number of sociologists have pointed out the conceptual difficulties of notions of race and ethnicity, some arguing for their abandonment as analytical categories (Fenton 2003, 2004, Brubaker 2004, Carter 2000, Hirschman 2004, MacDonald 2006). Meanwhile, sociolinguistic studies routinely include at least an explicit recognition that 'national' and 'ethnic' categories, as well as linguistic boundaries, are problematic in various ways. Despite this, there is nevertheless a widespread tendency to use such categories in the research design.

If we abandon the notion that there are ethnic groups, and limit 'nationality' to an administrative category, how then *do* we research the relationship between language use and social identification? Or, to put it another way, how is social research to obtain knowledge of the relationship between people's deployment of linguistic resources and their attachment to various forms of group identification? One recommendation is that research in this field should abandon the notion of *a priori*, already constituted ethnic groups, in favour of a notion of collectivities that sees them as arising politically and historically, from processes of subjugation, domination, dispossession and violence, not naturally and culturally. In relation to research in this area, Blommaert (2003: 612) advocates '... a holistic and world-systemic view in which local events are read locally as well as translocally, and in which *the world system with its structural inequalities is a necessary (but not self-explanatory) context* in which language occurs and operates' (italics in the original).

Important questions to investigate then become those such as:

'Which people, under what circumstances, come to understand their identity in ethnic or national terms? – and which do not?';

'What role does language play in these identifications?'



To pursue such lines of inquiry, methodologies are required that allow for recognition of both the distinct properties and powers of – and the interplay between – structure, culture and agency. Most branches of formal linguistics have proven fairly resistant to an engagement with sociological contributions to an understanding of language in use, prompting various reactions against this ‘over-rationalized’, ‘dehumanized’ and ‘unsocialized’ ‘dominant conception of language’ (Lemke 2002: 83).

One such reaction involves researchers who, attracted by approaches that allow for the interaction and emergence found in complex systems, conceptualise the issues using an ‘ecological’ metaphor. Drawing as it does both on ecosystem dynamics and social semiotics, this perspective tends to conceptualise the social world as mirroring the biological world:

As an organism develops in an ecosocial community (and this is not a development that is strictly and predictably controlled from within, but a result of system-environment interactions, in many ways contingent and variable), among the emergent organizational patterns in its interactions with others is its coming-to-use-language. (Lemke 2002: 71)

Following from this, it is processes and practices, rather than things or people, that become the primary units of analysis; language varieties and speakers’ choices are then described in terms of constraints and equilibrium rather than ‘rules’ (Lemke 1997; Kramsch 2002). In many ways this is a persuasive position, but we would want to counsel caution about assuming too great a similarity between human beings (with their distinctive agential powers), or human language (as a cultural emergent property), with phenomena in the natural world which have different properties.

The scope of research studies must necessarily be broad enough to identify ways in which structural decisions (the implementation of new language policies, for example) are likely to have far-reaching effects. This may mean, for example, that what was once an enabling factor for a specific individual or group (e.g. fluency in Russian as a resident of Estonia) can become a constraining one when policies change. Researchers need to find ways of collecting and collating data on such processes, as is advocated by Kaplan et al (2000: 5) when they note that ‘anything done to one language in a polity is likely to have effects on that language in all the other places it may be spoken and is likely to have an impact on all the other languages spoken in that polity’.

Empirical work is needed simultaneously at a local level, where the techniques developed in ethnography can provide evidence of how particular speakers in specific contexts negotiate the linguistic resources and the constraints and enablements conditioning their experience. As Blommaert (2003: 615) puts it, ‘[e]thnography will allow us to unravel the details of how language varieties and discourses work for people, what they accomplish (or fail to) in practice, and how this fits into local economies of resources.’ However, there are also limits to what ethnographic methods can reveal (see Sealey forthcoming). In particular, these ‘details’ are in part the result of structural arrangements (prior distributions of resources, for example) which are not always empirically observable and are also not reducible to the wishes or actions of those experiencing their effects.

Finally, we suggest that there is considerable potential in computer assisted methodologies. Some sociolinguistic studies are concerned with fine-grained variations in pronunciation, where it is often found that the variants selected by speakers provide clues as to the social groups with which they would prefer to identify – although speakers will have a repertoire on which to draw, and will almost certainly vary their pronunciation in relation to the social context. Cluster analysis can be used to identify patterns of similarity and difference across a range of speech samples, potentially providing evidence of the existence of social groupings – which may or may not correspond with the collectivities assumed in classifications by ‘ethnie’ or nationality.

Another fruitful method of exploring socially significant patterns in language use is the research field known as ‘corpus linguistics’. Originally developed to provide empirical evidence for claims made in dictionaries and grammars for language learners, language corpora are large repositories of digitally

stored authentic text, and the specialised software used to investigate them reveals patterns not readily discernable by the naked eye. Again, the technological tools can provide evidence of similar linguistic choices made by different speakers (or writers), whose characteristics can be considered to establish what, if anything, they have in common. A corpus of 150 oral histories is currently being investigated in this way by one of the authors. A preliminary finding from a pilot study of a sub-set of these life histories suggests that certain linguistic formulations are predominantly found among the speakers who regard themselves as actively religious, in contrast to those who profess no faith; the conventional 'ethnic' classification which would sometimes identify Muslims or Sikhs as collectivities would have masked a finding such as this.

In concluding this section, we would like to make a plea for methodological consistency with regard to the analysis of social collectivities. A great deal of research, some of which we have alluded to, begins by entering a disclaimer about the indeterminacy of ethnicity as a group boundary, its fluidity as a socially constructed enterprise, and the variability of what it is taken to signify; and yet many such studies proceed in their methodology to treat ethnic groups as though they were actually existing entities (a similar point can be made about both 'nation' and 'race'). This is an inconsistent strategy - since treating ethnic groups as though their boundaries were sufficiently stable for research purposes effectively undermines the notion of ethnicity as a relational and dynamic description.

Our position here requires some further explication. The culture in which social scientists work has, quite rightly, become increasingly critical of research approaches that exploit, condescend to, or loftily detach themselves from those being researched. Carmichael (2000: 281), for example, criticises Hobsbawm for taking 'a rather scathing view of the emotions that have stirred in the breasts of so many Europeans ...', and argues that 'the denial of national self-determination is an act of denial that defines the action of others as deviant, abnormal or irrational' (p. 288). Fishman (2001b: 452) is similarly critical of 'the mistake ... that Marxism classically committed when it opposed ethnic awakenings and consolidations', and he goes on to identify 'antiethnicity' as 'the last refuge of cosmopolitan authoritarians'. Researchers are thus under some pressure to distance themselves from judgements - in a moral, evaluative sense - of the beliefs, practices and motivations of the social actors they study. Thus, in the area of language and identity, certain methods (such as the ethnography advocated by Blommaert - see above) are celebrated in part for their willingness to take seriously the experiences, concepts and perceptions of those involved - and again, we are sympathetic to this orientation. We wish to make clear that our concern is with 'judgements' of a different kind, and would want to defend the claim that some descriptions are better than others for particular purposes. This is not to say that any scientific description is infallible or incorrigible, but merely to suggest that sociological descriptions and explanations require the kinds of conceptual categories which social science has developed. As Carmichael (op. cit) concedes, 'all nations are formed by cultural processes - language and ethnicity will never be an essence - and one day we might have new types of polity based on other elements of identity'. The researcher, therefore, must necessarily deploy concepts and categories with a more extensive scope than those which are based - in however hedged a formulation - on theoretically unsustainable essentialisms.

A view of social groups as emergent features of social action, more or less impermanent, more or less permeable and defined in part by those who are excluded from them, requires a more subtle approach than the reification of ethnic groups on the basis of respondents' own claims about their putative ethnic identification. Moreover, as research by Fenton (2007) has pointed out, reliance on people's self descriptions is methodologically unreliable; not only are lay definitions of what constitutes ethnicity varied, but many people do not use the term 'ethnicity' to define who they are. This is not a basis for compelling methodological prescription.

## Conclusion

We hope we have succeeded in making clear that the modest realism we advocate remains relatively open-minded in respect of the methods available for researching what might broadly be called 'language and society'. However, we are committed to methodologies that are congruent with a

particular social ontology, namely one which recognises that culture, structure and agency have distinct properties and powers, whose interplay generates the social world.

It is important to emphasise that it is human beings - and not languages or notional entities such as nations – who accomplish social action. In seeking to accomplish things in the world, social actors are (mostly) compelled to use language. Whenever they do so, however, there is an engagement with the linguistic resources available or accessible to them. Through this engagement they experience these resources in enabling and constraining ways. We conclude therefore that it is important to pay attention to the ways in which access to cultural and linguistic resources is structured, firstly through the deep social divisions among speakers of the same language and secondly, in the contemporary world, through the pre-eminent role of English as a global language.

Thus the distribution of access to linguistic resources is a political issue, not an issue of either the nature of language or the nature of knowledge. This has implications for how policy makers approach key questions of languages and social identities but also for how social researchers investigate these questions. Rather than starting from the claim that there are distinct languages and then proceeding to study, for example, their correlation with certain ethnic or national forms of identification, or how and in what ways they have become impure or hybridised, we advocate a different methodological starting point, one that sees the study of language use as a properly sociolinguistic exercise, namely that social action determines language use.

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