

LANGUAGE POLICY, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND POLITICS

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Abstract

The abstract dwells upon the mechanisms of language policy change in concern with national identity feeling as used in the pursuit of political dominance. Every day some languages are dying out, others are spreading its influence around. To believe that it's a natural development of a language is absurd because the decision on a language destiny (to develop or go extinct) is determined by the political, economic and social conjunctions of an area.

On the one hand, historically comes that political dominance moves forward and shapes the phenomenon of lingua franca. The English language, alike as the Russian (or Spanish and others), achieved the status of a lingua franca 'colonising' regions around. Language 'colonisation' process mainly consisted of implementation of the language of the dominating party into the conquered region and, thus diminishing the significance of the local language. As soon as the local language is given the second or third priority, this serves a sign that the local population is ready to be overtaken by another culture. Such political tricks were used by Great Britain, later the United States of America in the XX c., Soviet Union, Spain, France, etc.

On the other hand, local languages or language varieties (and other social conjunctions, such as national identity) are used today (usually by the side of the opposition) to bring about changes in the political situation and people's mentality. Many regions today are striving to revive their languages realizing the significance of their culture and national unity which might be well manipulated for the political reasons.

The significant role that political and social conjunctions are playing in shaping the language policy and national identity around the world, unfortunately, is very often underestimated.

Keywords: Language policy, national identity, political dominance

Introduction

Being an integral part of the national identity, language reflects what is most essential for any nation, its culture, history, customs and traditions. Language policy, in its turn, reflects any changes in a country or the world (social or political) being often used in concern with national identity feeling in the pursuit of political dominance.

The article is devoted to illustrate the interrelation and interdependence of three major factors that shape language development today: language policy, national identity and politics. Therefore, the main objectives of the article are as follows:

1. to display the phenomenon of language colonialism, i.e. when political dominance determines the status of a language as a lingua franca;
2. to illustrate the destiny of local languages under the 'colonization' of the lingua franca;
3. to show the interrelation between the language policy and national identity feeling;
4. to demonstrate how language policy and national identity feeling might be applied by the opposition uprising today to attain independence.

Main Text

There are two major mechanisms of language policy change that correlate with the national identity feeling and are intermingled within politics.

The first and the most obvious one is the ‘language colonization’ provided by the political dominance of the country. The language of a superpower is colonizing territories around, spreading its influence and, as a result, gets accepted as a lingua franca. Doing this, it is automatically minimizing the role of the local languages or other lingua francas in the region colonized. "Language has always been the companion of empire," claimed the sixteenth century Spanish grammarian Nebrija, which means that the language of more powerful invaders will always subdue the local language variety, pushing it to the edge of extinction.

On the other hand, the process of ‘language decolonization’ is taking place today. Minority languages or language varieties (and other social conjunctions, such as national identity) are used today to bring about changes in the political situation and people’s mentality. Many regions today are striving to revive their local languages by uprising and emphasizing the emergency of the national identification that is provided by the language. This might be well illustrated on the example of Ireland and the UK some years ago or the Northern Ireland and Scotland in the UK today, or Catalonia in Spain. Referendums are organized for the territory independence based on the national and language grounds when Standard English or Spanish are refused to be spoken on the territory of the countries relatively. Thus, it’s obvious enough what a significant role the political and social conjunctions are playing in shaping the language policy around the world.

Phenomenon of ‘language colonization’ goes back in history, when the political and economical superiority of one country won the cultural and language dominance over the occupied territory. This is what shaped the phenomenon of the lingua franca. For example, the English language was first exported by once extremely powerful Great Britain to new territories and its colonies. Later in the XX c. this role was overtaken by politically more influential country, the United States of America. Similarly, the example of the Russian language dominating over the Post-Soviet area for almost a century and, as a result, many Soviet Union member countries were on the edge of losing their national identity and languages as well. Both cases were conditioned by the powerful nations which displayed their dominance by prioritizing their national culture and language over the other ones. In the Soviet Union, for example, this was achieved by implementing the “russification” language policy when the non-Russians were limited in personal language rights whereas this wasn’t applied to the Russian population. This means that if you were ethnically a non-Russian, you could speak the Russian language everywhere whereas the use of your native language was territorially limited. This was a crucial change in the people’s mentality, because it directly weakened the national identity feeling of many nations. Because the language reflects the cultural and national peculiarities, it becomes much easier to change a person’s mentality by depriving them from a chance of speaking their national language. Promotion of the Russian language could make the Russian culture easier implemented in the member countries. The result of the “russification” language policy was that the number of the Russian language speakers immensely increased from 150 mln people in the beginning of the XX c. to 350 mln people in 90 years.

Even more dramatic was the situation in the UK where since the rise of the purist linguistic conservatism and ‘Forster’s Act’ in the XVIII c. the only variety accepted in the society and to be spoken at schools was the Standard English. Those who mistreated the social and language ideology were physically punished (at schools) and even withdrawn from the society. In contrast to the Soviet Union, hegemonic English ideology lasted for several centuries that has drawn the country to the dramatic language situation today. During the last

couple of centuries there are 2 officially accepted extinct British languages: Auregnais spoken in the Channel Islands, last speaker died in 1950 and Norn, spoken in the Shetland Islands, Orkney Islands & Caithness, last speaker died in 1880 (Unst, Shetland Islands). As a result of the Highland Clearances in the eighteenth century, the number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland dropped from 231,594 people in 1881 to 92 000 in 2001. The Welsh language had become a minority language by 1911, spoken only by 43.5% of the population. The number of Welsh speakers had dropped down to 18.5% in 1991. Similarly catastrophic statistics can be provided concerning other minority languages in the UK: Cornish (0.8%), Irish Gaelic (7%), etc.

This clearly demonstrates the essential catastrophic outcomes of language colonization by dominating lingua francas that might bring other languages and cultures to extinction.

In such cases national identity feeling might restore the language situation. Lately, more and more often this notion is used in political discourse by minority nations in pursuit of independence. In a society where national identity and national feeling are brought back to people, they are ready to rise and fight for their rights. This is what is happening now in many Post-Soviet countries, Great Britain, Spain (Catalonia), etc..

After the fall of the Soviet Union the post-soviet countries started “decentralization” of the Russian language policy. Considering that the majority of population in Kazakhstan were Russian speakers in 1991, the president of the country, N. Nazarbaev, clearly realized that his country was losing its national identity and the culture. Thus, first, he started with crucial changes in the state and language policy of the country. He claimed the Kazakh language to be the state language in the country since 1989 providing the Russian language with the *de jure* status of an international language of communication. Later on he launched the process of ‘kazakhization’ which considered a number of Acts to be taken in order to revive the cultural and national identity among the population. The efforts aimed at diminishing the role of the Russian language were proved to have succeeded in several years when the number of schoolchildren studying at Kazakh educational institutions had reached the number of those from the Russian institutions in 2000-2001. In the following 5 years the number of Russian schools dropped in number of 303 around the country, with the number of Kazakh schools increasing in 46. Business communication is also mainly conducted either in the Kazakh language or English. According to the government language planning, the number of Kazakh language speakers is estimated to rise from 60% to 90% in 2020, whereas the number of Russian speakers is already 89% and it will rise to the point of 90%. In Ukraine, the ‘russification’ process has gone that far away that, according to the research, 30% of Ukrainian by origin schoolchildren claimed the Russian language to be their native language. This demonstrates the consequence of the Soviet policy that has brought to social changes in Ukraine, i.e. the loss of language skills has resulted in the absence of the national identity recognition. Considering that in some regions there are absolutely no schools in Ukrainian, in order to bring the country back to its origins and national culture, the Russian speaking institutions started to be boycotted: the number of Russian kindergartens was reduced in 22%, schools in 29% and students studying in Russian dropped in 22 %.

A more complicated situation is taking place in the UK. If the post-soviet countries have started struggling against the Russian language colonization after the fall of the Soviet Union, the British regions are doing that being a part of the UK bearing the idea of becoming independent in their mind. To make people vote for independence, local politicians, first of all, have to solve the issue of the fading national identity feeling. In order to do so, a new language policy is implemented that emphasizes the importance of the national language to revive and the nation to unite. One example is Scotland that is pushing its “Say Yes to an independent Scotland’ campaign during the last years. One of the major moves is made by

implementing the Scottish culture and language in the educational system. There is a Scots language Centre that is working hard on the Scots language promotion, the Scots Spelling Committee that is giving recommendations on spelling and pronunciation, a number of writers are publishing books and poems in Scots. Meanwhile, the Scottish Gaelic is given a rise, as well. If the Education (Scotland) Act 1872 completely ignored Gaelic, and led to generations of Gaels being forbidden to speak their native language in the classroom, according to the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 and the National Plan for Gaelic, they are aimed at introducing Gaelic language education in primary schools and raising the number of people speaking it up to 100 000 people. This will help to restore the Gaelic language to 'a state of natural growth'. Interestingly enough, in contrast to the Scots or Scottish Gaelic, according to the Welsh Language Act 1993 and the Government of Wales Act 1998, the Welsh and the English language are provided the common grounds and must be treated equally in public and government spheres. Thus, the Welsh is the only language today in the UK that is provided a status of a state language de jure. Television and Radio are available today in the Welsh language. The 2004 Welsh Language Use Survey revealed 21.7% of the population of Wales to be Welsh speakers, compared with 20.8% in the 2001 census, and 18.5% in 1991. Even though today Wales is also contemplating about applying for its independence, in contrast to Scotland, the Welsh officials admit that they are not ready for such a big step, neither economically, nor socially.

Conclusion

The few cases provided in the article reveal the interrelation between the language policy and political conjunctions that determine the development of a language (positively or negatively) and national identity feeling among the natives. A language policy change might be considered as the first step to significant changes (political, social, economical) taking place in the region in future.

Thus, it is paradoxical that the notions of language policy, national identity and political conjunctions are so interrelated and interdependent but have not been given a proper overview in social sciences and linguistics. The analysis of language policy as a political tool intended to bring social changes and interfere in the life of a nation seems to be of great significance because this can serve as a starting point of a nation history change. The uniqueness of the research is provided by its interdisciplinary character and the fact that it could bridge social sciences and linguistics. Finally, the research of language policy under the influence of political conjunctions can be, on the one hand, applied in political studies to observe the moods and tendencies in political life of many countries; on the other hand, this could serve a good signal to the language policy makers, linguists and academicians to work hard on protecting the languages that might seem to be under the danger of lingua franca 'colonization'.

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