THE POWER OF LANGUAGE: FROM HISTORY TO THE PRESENT STATE

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"To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture."
From Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks [5]

ABSTRACT

The role of language is difficult to overestimate as it is the main tool of communication, both written and oral. Language ensures historical diversity. It is an important part of identity and can be observed as “a social event” (Mikhail Bakhtin). National cultures are best embodied through languages. Losing a language therefore means a loss of historical and social richness, as well as traditional values. Preservation of language provides tradition and continuity.

Attitudes to language have changed over the centuries as a result of social, political and ideological pressure. Since ancient times philosophers, linguists and researchers (Socrates, Giambattista Vico, Johann Gottfried Herder, Oswald Spengler, Martin Heidegger, Ernest Gellner and many others) have investigated the power of language in the creation of consciousness, identity and attitudes. Their arguments and conclusions are extremely interesting and valuable. At different periods of historical development the importance of language was stressed in different contexts. Even in the Biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) it is stated that Noah’s descendants tried to erect a tower that would reach heaven, but the Lord, judging them for their pride, deprived them of the common language, which made it impossible for them to understand each other. This narrative, in which linguistic diversity is explained as the punishment of God, has determined our attitude toward languages for many centuries. As a result, the conviction has arisen that linguistic diversity is essentially undesirable. Nevertheless, those linguistically diverse societies had been carrying out monolingual policies which were finally stopped by the development of multilingualism in our globalized world. Nowadays language distribution is unequal and out of six thousand languages only five of them (English, Russian, Spanish, Chinese and Hindi) dominate and there are those who speak about suppression of linguistic diversity.

The fundamentally new communication situation forces us to rethink some basic issues of individual multilingualism connected with the process of a person’s socialization. The contemporary world abundantly provides us with new opportunities for the expansion of dialogue, cooperation and mutual understanding on a number of important issues.

Keywords: language, identity, culture, linguistic diversity, monolingual policy, multilingualism, dialogue

INTRODUCTION

The role of language in the political and social upheavals of the contemporary world is difficult to overestimate as it is the main tool of communication, both written and oral.
Language ensures historical diversity. It is an important part of identity and can be observed as "a social event" (Mikhail Bakhtin) [2]. National cultures are best embodied through languages. Losing a language therefore means a loss of historical and social richness, as well as traditional values. Preservation of language provides tradition and continuity. A language system is often compared to an ecosystem. Similarly to biological species, languages do not function in isolation but develop by contact with others. If one of them were to die, this might have serious consequences for other languages in the same ecosystem. Diversity is important for the survival of mankind. If we take a look at the natural ecosystem, evolution is what makes species stronger and guarantees their survival. The greater the variety, the stronger the ecosystem is and this is also true for the linguistic ecosystem as languages are the main tools through which cultures are transmitted. The greater the number of languages spoken, the greater the pool of inherited knowledge [3].

Attitudes to language have changed over the centuries as a result of social, political and ideological pressure. Since ancient times philosophers, linguists and researchers have investigated the role of language in shaping consciousness, identity and attitudes. Their arguments and conclusions are extremely interesting and valuable. The paper presents an overview of a number of different approaches by the linguists of the past to the intricate relations of language and culture, which are still relevant today.

The interpretation of language as an independent object of study in philosophy is a longstanding tradition. Socrates was perhaps the first to note the complex nature of language, which 'dictates' certain views on the world whilst creating an image of seeming simplicity and transparency of its existence. Socrates calls attention to this in his dialogues. He also highlighted the fact that spoken and written thoughts are not identical. Socrates stressed the importance of in-person dialogue for the development and, indeed, for the very existence of philosophy itself. Deliberately organized dialogue gave rise to the style of philosophising that came to be known as Socratic. Socratic discussions tend to imply an understanding of language primarily as speech. This in turn implies the existence of a direct, or hidden, supposed interlocutor. Hence, Socrates' highly negative views on writing. In his opinion, writing separates people, substituting text for real contact, and separating the thinkers (or, indeed, other people) in time. Writing is impersonal, and as such, does not possess any moral implications.

E. Gellner [6:39] justly remarks that writing was a significant factor in social differentiation. Possessing the written word, as opposed to speech, offered people an opportunity to acquire a new form of property – information. A word that has been put down in writing is impossible to re-interp;e. One cannot impose one's own meaning on it on the basis of personal experience and preferences. The importance of fixing language in writing proved so enormous, that E. Gellner proposed the introduction of a new typology of civilisations, to include those before the existence of written records, those that leave written records, and those that come after [6:39]. Language was interpreted as a means of communication, a means of thinking and discovering the world, or else as a Law that ensured the configuration of social chaos.

In the Western European cultural tradition, the issue of the strictness and purity of language arose as early as the Renaissance, when the Golden Age of Latin was discussed. A return to the roots of European civilisation, or to Antiquity, was understood as a return to the strict linguistic canons of ancient times. These were seen as imposing not only the aesthetic norms of ancient poetics, but also the ideal state of human existence during classical antiquity. Interestingly, the achievements of medieval rhetoric and scholasticism, so significant in the development of argumentation theory, were barely taken into account, or viewed as negative. Renaissance philosophers deemed the language of medieval debates to be overly dry and complicated. The style of philosophising that came to be accepted in that era was more emotional and personal. The requirements around "pure, Golden-Age Latin" – when Latin became the general cultural standard – led to philosophical texts being composed as works of art. The language of metaphysics became overly human. This enabled the following generation of philosophers to interpret the role of language as an extremely important factor in the evolution of humans, society and culture.

Today, the interaction of languages is most often seen as a global problem that accumulates around the traditional 'centres' of East and West. Attraction to these centres can determine both the quality, and the measure of communication. Determining the sociocultural preconditions for this became possible when close contact was established between different traditions. At present, East and West are communicating at an unprecedented degree, and are in need of a deeper understanding of each other. No longer a matter of intellectual curiosity, today this need is crucial in real-life terms.

The issues we are here examining began to come to the fore in philosophical, historical and culturological thought in the late seventeenth – early eighteenth century. This was brought about by a whole host of factors. Firstly, Eurocentric views and practices underwent change in connection with the discovery and study of previously unknown cultures and languages. Secondly, the understanding of history and creation of the philosophy of history were connected with a process of revaluation of the role of language in the sociocultural and historic process. Thirdly, language became an independent object of study in both philosophy and linguistics. Finally, during this time, Oriental motifs began to play a significant role in Europe, creating an objective need for comparative studies. All this went to show that European culture was no longer self-sufficient. The need for dialogue was becoming of paramount importance. This process could be seen as consisting of the following stages.

The role of dialogue and the importance of language in this process were discussed in the 'Persian Letters' of Montesquieu, in 'Confucius Is the Socrates of China' by De La Mothe Le Vayer, in Goethe's 'West-East Divan', in 'Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man' by Johann von Herder and in Giambattista Vico's 'Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations'. Vico saw the understanding of language as the result of different types of human activity. Language, he claimed, is a 'repository of the universal, unconscious and uncontrollable' [12]. In Vico's view, language is connected with the functioning and change of religious and civil institutions. Language is given to a culture as a communicative disposition, it is formed in accordance with the vital needs of the people, which have to be immediately reflected and expressed through signs. Due to its position 'above nature', language became a mediator and conductor of the 'behavioural world' of ancient peoples. Vico stressed that 'popular folk speech' and 'dialects' perhaps best express times and morals. Accumulating cultural experience, they absorb the constants that form the image of the world prevalent in that or that culture [12].

In examining the genetic forms of language, Vico stressed the etymological context, taking into account the mutual influence between languages. This could be said to be his main accomplishment. The philosopher stressed that language is primarily connected with expressing the ability to reflect, with the need to 'see oneself as if apart from the
corpoREAL. The interaction of languages is determined by their universal ability to transfer corporeal characteristics to values on a different plane, the emotional and the mental. Thus, anthropological universality brings the objective possibility of mutual understanding between different peoples, through language. In culture, language 'humanizes' and 'feels at home in' nature: human activity allows nature to 'live and feel' [12]. Understood as activity to humanise nature, culture is primarily connected with the functioning of languages.

Vico correlated cultural and historic stages with forms of language. The first stage of sociocultural development relates to language with minimal articulation. This is a 'mute time'. The era of traditional cultures is linked to language which is 'semi-mute' linguistically articulated. The modern era is connected to ... language, which is linked to rational, intellectual human faculties. Vico felt that in its evolution, language accumulates all prior forms and all possible influences, that it absorbs all existing tongues which it encounters in the process of the mutual influence of cultures [12].

Herder also paid a lot of attention to issues around the sociocultural determination of language. Examining issues in the evolution of language, Herder distinguishes three ages of language, corresponding to certain cultural types. In his book 'Fragmente über die Neure Deutsche Literatur', Herder writes that the infancy of language corresponds to the cultures from the area of the East described in the Bible, its youth to Greek culture, and its maturity, to the culture of ancient Rome. Cultural evolution, for Herder, is directly linked to the linguistic influence and interaction between different civilisations.

'The Egyptian without Oriental childhood instruction would not be an Egyptian, the Greek without Egyptian school-diligence not a Greek' [10:291]. Herder repeatedly noted that the interaction between languages and cultures can take different forms such as mutual understanding, assimilation or repulsion. The language and nature of the interaction will depend on factors such as the degree, the level of development of science, art, religion and morality. The nature of the linguistic interaction is determined by a multitude of material, spiritual, social and psychological factors, Herder claims. Fascinating are Herder's ideas around the nature of language determining culture. Thus, the traditionalism of Chinese civilisation is, according to Herder, primarily due to the 'peculiarity of the Chinese language', which limits 'the free development of spirit'. The first stage of development of a culture is connected with writing acquiring a certain status, that allows the 'learned culture' to be distinguished from the 'culture of the people', Herder noted. The interaction at each of these levels is different. If contact between the 'cultures of the people' is problematic, at the level of 'learned culture', 'conceptual language' makes understanding easier, promoting the mutual borrowing and exchange of ideas.

Europe was only able to become Europe due to the fact that Babylon and Egypt lent it their experience and knowledge through linguistic interaction, Herder stressed. 'And thanks to Europe, this became accessible to all peoples living on this Earth' [9:316]. The interaction involved both borrowing the experience from various trades, and using images from the arts, as well as scientific discoveries. In examining such interaction, Herder stressed the special role of three languages and of the peoples who spoke them. These were the Jews, Arabs and Greeks. The Greeks produced an elegant worldview, a philosophy and art of classical measure. The Jews and the Arabs became the conductors of accumulated experience and knowledge from Asia, from the East, to Europe. The interaction of different peoples and cultures promoted the evolution of humankind, 'influencing the spirit of the peoples as a benefactor'. From Herder's point of view, the mutual influence between different languages was to lead to the establishment of humanism and a rational organisation of life. Formed in different cultures, yet perfected chiefly in medieval Europe, the art of speech was, according to the German philosopher, to play a special role in this movement. The main function of language in any culture is to develop the human mind's capacity for independent thought. The mutual enrichment of languages which occurs in the process of solving practical problems in trade, science, morality and the arts, is connected with shared historic prospects and with 'an increase in speed of thought and presence of spirit' [9:599]. The mutual enrichment of languages impacts changes in ways of thinking, enriching cultural traditions.

An important role in the interaction of different languages is played by the process of objectification of a people's character through, and by means of, language. 'Generic folk character' is stable: 'it was discovered in Greeks, Romans, Gauls and Germans in ancient times; capabilities and mind remain the same, yet their creations and fruits are different' [9:151]. The 'differences' are precisely what makes communication possible, yet at the same time, communication is impossible without the presence of certain universal traits. Such 'universal things' can be seen as including the identical structure of all languages, which enables understanding and the possibility of translation. The political state of a people and the institutions that express this state, such as laws, methods of governance and civil establishments, are extremely important in the manifestation of the diversity of cultures through linguistic interaction, Herder wrote. The imperfection of forms of governance is directly connected to the 'imperfection of forms of culture', Herder suggests [9:153]. Herder proceeds to illustrate this idea with an analysis of the Islamic and Judean civilisations, and puts forward the following view: the form of governance that supplies the correct measure and attitude, is freedom' [9:165]. Freedom is a pre-condition for languages to interact on an equal footing and with equal rights. Herder also stressed the importance of the invention of book-printing for intercultural communication. Interaction between different languages promotes the development of new methods of education, new examples, skills and abilities. It also helps destroy the 'monopoly of thought' — the most pernicious phenomenon for cultural progress.

Besides the exchange of ideas and book-printing, Herder felt that interaction between languages was also furthered by 'the exploration of other countries, travel' and 'the discovery of the treasures of literature of different countries'. The establishment of library foundations, archives and collections of documents and manuscripts is a natural condition for different peoples to improve their knowledge of each other, a natural reserve for the interaction of languages, Herder insisted. Such interaction can be valuable to helping to overcome barbarism, lack of knowledge, ignorance, and superstition.

As civilisations develop and progress, the 'mutually beneficial influence' between different cultures and languages, grows. Thanks to this, 'many find themselves with renewed vigour... People create increasing numbers of ever more complicated instruments; they learn to use each other as tools. The physical force of humanity is growing; the sphere of progress is widening...' [9:209, 212].

The basis for the global interaction of languages, Herder stresses, is humanism as a universal quality of human thought.

The problem of the sociocultural conditions for the interaction between languages was addressed in the nineteenth century also, in works such as Hegel's 'Lectures on the
Philosophy of Religion’ and Friedrich Schlegel’s ‘On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians’, as well as by Friedrich Schelling, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and many others.

Hegel, for instance, claimed that the possibility of comparing different cultural and historical phenomena is due to the unity of history and the theory of thought. This unity, he claimed, manifests as a process of gradual unveiling of an absolute idea.

Orwell Spengler compared the Indian, classical, Arab and Western cultures, seeking to deduce the mechanisms of their interaction. The philosopher’s work was based on the morphology of culture which he developed. In discovering the dialectic of the development of forms of culture, one can discuss the formal similarities between different cultures, which also form the basis for the interaction between languages.

Later, issues were also addressed by Albert Schweitzer, Carl Jung, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger and Hermann Hesse. Almost all researchers examined the questions of interest to us from a standpoint of accepting the equality and identity of cultural phenomena in different parts of the world.

Notable contributions to the development of this topic have been made by contemporary authors such as Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Claude Lévi-Strauss, G. E. Moore, Mikhail Bakhtin and many others.

The twenty-first century brought with it the realization that our personal worlds have become ‘smaller’, time is passing ‘faster’, and our communication is ‘closer’ and more effective. Modern communications systems have brought different cultures much closer together. Previously ‘alien’ cultures are engaging in an ongoing long-term contact. Regional cultural connections are being established and strengthened. The twenty-first century is a time of ‘meeting of cultures’ and of different types of civilisations. This allows for valuable ongoing economic, political, religious and other borrowing and influence that are important for the cultures in question. Objective premises for the ‘globalization’ of cultural contacts are appearing, as principles of ‘world’ policy are developing, along with principles of ‘world’ history and of universal human values, seemingly of world significance, and with democratic principles of governance.

The process of ‘approachment’ between cultures and civilisations is, nonetheless, proving extremely difficult. The main obstacle could be said to be the inclination towards hegemony and ethnocentrism. Under the guise of interaction, a particular way of life, values, worldview, ideals, norms or models may be forced onto others. Backed up by the material well-being and successful technical and social development of its countries, Europe’s cultural influence is becoming desirable and attractive to others. This can be seen in the defending of kulturträger policies, as well as in the spontaneously arising domination of a single language in the process of intercultural contacts. (The relationship between standard languages and multilingualism from a historical, cross-European perspective is very well provided in a comprehensive overview of the emergence of a standard language ideology and its intricate relationship with matters of ethnicity, territorial unity and social mobility. [11]).

Ethnocentrism always supposes the absence of the ‘voice of another’, a lack of other options or alternatives. As a result, the threat of cultural and civilisation-wide uniformity, and the total levelling of cultures, are being spoken about increasingly often. These strategies are not merely being carried out through the retransmission of cultural values and models via mass media, advertising and product expansion. They are also being supported by political and socioeconomic programmes, as well as by long-term educational and cultural initiatives. These strategies are successful not only because of targeted policies in the countries aspiring to the role of world leaders, but also because the ‘receiving’ countries are incapable of resisting the ‘cultural expansion’ due to factors such as poverty or crises. This results in processes of migration, which demand cultural and social adaptation through rapid language-learning. This, in turn, gives rise to two tendencies. The first could be summed up thus: unable to resist the dominating influence due to a shortage of power and resources, the cultures of certain regions simply ‘dissolve’ in ‘world civilisation’, losing their originality.

The second tendency is connected with the need to assimilate a vast stream of migrants into developed countries. With this aim in mind, education in a multicultural environment is especially valuable. Here, language is a vital precondition for the interaction within a single educational structure of people from different ethnic backgrounds, cultures, religious and language communities. During education, participants find themselves at the crossroads of different processes connected both with enculturation and with acculturation. As a result, rather than finding themselves at the ‘centre’ of the culture being studied, they find themselves on its periphery. Lacking the time necessary to clarify cultural dominants, participants focus instead on achieving a state of being ‘like the others’, reproducing superficial models. They do not strive to preserve their own cultural identity. When representatives of different cultural communities engage in educational practices, this leads to a levelling of the traits that distinguish them as bearers of a particular culture and of a particular sociocultural experience. An effective means of substituting cultural models and values, which is associated with a certain degree of marginalisation of participants in this process, in this case, education does not stress the bilingual determinant. When the situation is exacerbated in the case of representatives of ethno-cultural minorities, receiving an education can mean that the values they absorb in the course of this process ‘frequently do not reflect ways of acting that are accepted within their cultures, which can lead to conflicts between that which is taught at school, and that which is truly valued at home and at school’ [4:94]. Thus, through ‘linguistic models’ society sets sociocultural dominants, motivations and behavioural strategies.

The meeting of cultures and the interaction of languages which are occurring in the twenty-first century should be seen, as Martin Heidegger wrote, as ‘dialogue-debate, not as a dispute’, but as a ‘process that enriches and elevates both sides’ [8:81].

In examining the dialogue of cultures in contemporary sociocultural development, we may apply Mikhail Bakhtin’s views on the ‘likelihood of crisis’ in any situation involving speech in real communication. In this particular situation, this would imply ‘the likelihood of crisis in communication’, which can be objectified into a situation of creative potential, leading to the development of effective interaction [2].

CONCLUSION

Where global policy for humanity is concerned, the disappearance of any type of alternative is fatal. The negative attitude towards linguistic variety, suppression of linguistic diversity cannot guarantee peaceful communication. All ‘universal values’ eventually turn out to be the values of a specific historical situation. There is perhaps no greater totalitarianism than forcing ‘a certain order’ [1:26]. There is little doubt that we will end up with a shared culture and one world. There is no preferred universality; the
‘voices of the Other’ should, if possible, be maintained. “Civic and community life is at its best when it happens through many cultures. Whether we consider ourselves monolinguals or multilinguals, it is the practice of honouring the historical and social richness of our language repertoires, and expecting that others do the same”. [7]. The contemporary world in abundance provides man with new opportunities for the expansion of dialogue, cooperation and mutual understanding on a number of important issues. Language is undoubtedly a powerful tool in this process.

REFERENCES

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY OF HUNGARIANS IN SLOVAKIA AND UDMURTS IN UDMURTIA

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ABSTRACT
Paper will shortly define the notion of minority, identify the basic issues of a sense of identity, and clarify the role of language in the maintenance of minorities and their identities. We will ask what the role of language in different state formations is and whether identity maintenance plays a role in the maintenance of minority languages and linguistic diversity. The data are provided as results of a questionnaire survey. The target groups of the research were university students as future intellectuals consequently opinion-shapers of the given ethnicity. Three groups were formed: Hungarian university students in Slovakia, Russian university students in Udmurtia, and Udmurt university students in Udmurtia.

Keywords: bilingualism, identity, minorities, Udmurts, Hungarians in Slovakia

INTRODUCTION
In my paper I examine the possible role of language in the survival of minorities and the maintenance of their identity. I investigate these issues via a questionnaire survey carried out among the Udmurts and Slovakia Hungarians, two minority groups of approximately the same size. We aim to identify differences and similarities in the situation of the two groups, with regard to their languages and national identities, stemming from the fact that the former group has lived as a minority for several centuries, whereas the latter became a minority after being separated from its nation state. Specifically, our investigation seeks to answer the question what kind of interrelationship exists between the identity and language attitudes toward mother tongue among young Udmurt people and Slovaks Hungarians who are devoted to their first language (they study in programs using the minority language as a language of instruction and are training to be teachers).

In international documents, terms such as people, nation, ethnicity, and minority are used as synonyms of each other, without clearcut definitions. However, a common denominator of various definitions is that minority groups generally have a sense of community (organized around a well definable group identity), a common will to preserve that group cohesion and usually, but not always, a territorial concentration.

An ethnic group is a group of members of a society who do not identify with the majority nation but (a) identify, instead, with another nation – which either has a state of its own or aims to form one, or (b) a group forming a minority which cannot be defined through the notion of the modern nation but whose members share a cultural identity which is significantly different from that of the majority.

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354
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