Language and cultural identity

In 1915, Edmond Laforest, a prominent Haitian writer, stood upon a bridge, tied a French Larousse dictionary around his neck, and leapt to his death. This symbolic, if fatal, grand gesture dramatizes the relation of language and cultural identity. Henry Louis Gates, who recounts this story, adds 'While other black writers, before and after Laforest, have been drowned artistically by the weight of various modern languages, Laforest chose to make his death an emblem of this relation of overwhelming indenture.' (*'Race', Writing, and Difference*. University of Chicago Press 1985, page 13). This event will help us bring together several notions that have emerged in the previous chapters; the motivated, non-arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, the link between a language and its legitimate discourse community, the symbolic capital associated with the use of a particular language or of a literate form of that language, in short the association of language with a person's sense of self. We explore in this chapter the complex relationship between language and what is currently called 'cultural identity.

Cultural identity

It is widely believed that there is a natural connection between the language spoken by members of a social group and that group's identity. By their accent, their vocabulary, their discourse patterns, speakers identify themselves and are identified as members of this or that speech and discourse community. From this membership, they draw personal strength and pride, as well as a sense of social importance and historical continuity from using the same language as the group they belong to.

But how to define which group one belongs to? In isolated, homogeneous communities like the Trobrianders studied by Malinowski, one may still define group membership according to common cultural practices and daily face-to-face interactions, but in modern, historically complex, open societies it is much more difficult to define the boundaries of' any particular social group and the linguistic and **cultural identities** of its members.

Take ethnicity for example. In their 1982 survey conducted among the highly mixed population of Belize (formerly British Honduras), Le Page and Tabouret Keller found out that different people ascribed themselves to different ethnicities as either 'Spanish', 'Creole', 'Maya' or 'Belizean', according to which ethnic criterion they focused on--physical features (hair and skin), general appearance, genetic descent,

provenance, or nationality. Rarely was language used as an ethnically defining criterion. Interestingly, it was only under the threat of a Guatemalan takeover as soon as British rule would cease, that the sense of a Belizean national identity slowly started emerging from among the multiple ethnic ascriptions that people still give themselves to this day.

Group identity based on race would seem easier to define, and yet there are almost as many genetic differences, say, between members of the same White, or Black race as there are between the classically described human races, not to speak of the difficulty in some cases of ascertaining with 100 per cent exactitude a person's racial lineage. For example, in 1983 the South African Government changed the racial classification of 690 people: two-thirds of these, who had been Coloreds, became Whites, 71 who had been Blacks became Coloreds, and II Whites were redistributed among other racial groups! And, of course, there is no necessary correlation between a given racial characteristic and the use of a given language or variety of language. Regional identity is equally contestable. As reported in the London *Times* of February 1984, when a Soviet book, *Populations of the World*, claimed that the population of France consisted of 'French, Alsatians, Flemings, Bretons, Basques, Catalans, Corsicans, jews, Armenians, Gypsies and "others"', Georges Marchais, the French Communist leader, violently disagreed: 'For us', he said, 'every man and woman of French nationality is French. France is not a multinational state: it is one nation, the product of a long history .... '

One would think that national identity is a clear-cut either/or affair (either you are or you are not a citizen), but it is one thing, for example, to have a Turkish passport, another thing to ascribe to yourself a Turkish national identity if you were born, raised and educated, say, in Germany, are a native speaker of German, and happen to have Turkish parents.

Despite the entrenched belief in the one language = one culture equation, individuals assume several collective identities that are likely not only to change over time in dialogue with others, but are liable to be in conflict with one another. For example, an immigrant's sense of self, that was linked in his country of origin perhaps to his social class, his political views, or his economic status, becomes, in the new country, overwhelmingly linked to his national citizenship or his religion, for this is the identity that is imposed on him by others, who see in him now, for example, only a Turk or a Muslim. His own sense of self, or cultural identity, changes accordingly. Out of nostalgia for the 'old country', he may tend to become more Turkish than the Turks and entertain what Benedict Anderson has called 'long distance nationalism'. The Turkish he speaks may become with the passing of years somewhat different from the Turkish spoken today in the streets of Ankara; the community he used to belong to is now more an 'imagined community' than the actual present-day Turkey.

Cultural stereotypes

The problem lies in equating the racial, ethnic, national identity imposed on an individual by the state's bureaucratic system, and that individual's self-ascription. Group identity is not a natural fact, but a cultural perception, to use the metaphor with which We started this book. Our perception of someone's social identity is very much culturally determined. What we perceive about a person's culture and language is what We have been conditioned by our own culture to see, and the stereotypical models already built around our own. Group identity is a question of **focusing** and **diffusion** of ethnic, racial, national concepts or stereotypes. Let us take an example.

Le Page and Tabouret-Keller recount the case of a man in Singapore who claimed that he would never have any difficulty in telling the difference between an Indian and a Chinese. But how would he instantly know that the dark-skinned non-Malay person he saw on the street was an Indian (and not, say, a Pakistani), and that the light-skinned non-European was a Chinese (and not, say, a Korean), unless he differentiated the two according to the official Singaporean 'ethnic' categories: Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others? In another context with different racial classifications he might have interpreted differently the visual clues presented to him by people on the street. His impression was *focused* by the classificatory concepts prevalent in his society, a behavior that Benjamin Whorf would have predicted. In turn this focus may prompt him, by a phenomenon of *diffusion*, to identify all other 'Chinese' along the same ethnic categories, according to the stereotype 'All Chinese look alike to me'.

It has to be noted that societies impose racial and ethnic categories only on certain groups: Whites do not generally identify themselves by the color of their skin, but by their provenance or nationality. They would find it ludicrous to draw their sense of cultural identity from their membership in the White race. Hence the rather startled reaction of two Danish women in the United States to a young African-American boy, who, overhearing their conversation in Danish, asked them 'What's your culture?'. Seeing how perplexed they were, he explained with a smile 'See, I'm Black. That's my culture. What's yours?'. Laughingly they answered that they spoke Danish and came from Denmark. Interestingly, the boy did not use language as a criterion of group identity, but the Danes did.

European identities have traditionally been built much more around language and national citizenship, and around folk models of 'one nation : one language', than around ethnicity or race. But even in Europe the matter is not so simple. For example, Alsatians who speak German, French and Germanic Platt may alternatively consider themselves as primarily Alsatians, or French, or German, depending on how

they position themselves *vis-à-vis* the history of their region and their family biography. A youngster born and raised in France of Algerian parents may, even though he speaks only French, call himself Algerian in France, but when abroad he might prefer to he seen as French, depending on which group he wishes to be identified with at the time.

Examples from other parts of the world show how complex the language-cultural identity relationship really is. The Chinese, for example, identify themselves ethnically as Chinese even though they speak languages or dialects which are mutually unintelligible. Despite the fact that a large number of Chinese don't know how to read and write, it is the Chinese character-writing system and the art of calligraphy that are the major factors of an overall Chinese group identity.

A further example of the difficulty of equating one language with one ethnic group is given by the case of the Sikhs in Britain.

Threatened to lose public recognition of their cultural and religious distinctiveness, for example, the wearing of the Sikh turban in schools, Sikh religious leaders have tried to bolster the group's identity by promoting the teaching of Punjabi, endogamy, and patterns of behavior felt to be central to Sikhism, including hair styles and the wearing of turbans. However, seen objectively, neither the Punjabi language nor the wearing of turbans is peculiar to Sikhism either in India or Pakistan or Britain. Many cultures have survived even though their language has virtually disappeared (for instance the Yiddish of jewish culture, the Gullah of American Black culture, the Indian languages of East Indian culture in the Caribbean); others have survived because they were part of an oral tradition kept up within an isolated community (for example, Acadian French in Louisiana), or because their members learned the dominant language, a fact that ironically enabled them to keep their own. Thus in New Mexico, a certain Padre Martinez of Taos led the cultural resistance of Mexican Spanish speakers against the American occupation by encouraging them to learn English as a survival tool so that they could keep their Hispanic culture and the Spanish language alive.

Language crossing as act of identity

One way of surviving culturally in immigration settings is to exploit, rather than stifle, the endless variety of meanings afforded by participation in several discourse communities at once. More and more people are living, speaking and interacting in in-between spaces, across multiple languages or varieties of the same language: Latinos in Los Angeles, Pakistanis in London, Arabs in Paris, but also Black

Americans in New York or Atlanta, choose one way of talking over another depending on the topic, the interlocutor and the situational context. Such **language crossings**, frequent in inter-ethnic communication, include, as we saw in Chapter 4, the switching of codes, i.e. the insertion of elements from one language into another, be they isolated words, whole sentences, or prosodic features of speech. Language crossing enables speakers to change footing within the same conversation, but also to show solidarity or distance towards the discourse communities whose languages they are using, and whom they perceive their interlocutor as belonging. By crossing languages, speakers perform cultural **acts of identity**. Thus, for example, two bilingual 12-year olds from Mexico in a US American school. M is telling F what she does when she comes back from school. M and F usually speak their common language, Spanish.

M: Mira, me pongo a hacer tarea, después me pongo leer un libro, despues me pongo a hacer matemática, después de hacer matematica me pongo a practicar en el piano, después de terminarse en el piano =

F: = you got a piano?

M: I have a piano in my house, don't you guys know it? … No me digas que no sabía … yo lo dije a Gabriel y a Fernando … todo el mundo.

[M: Look, I do homework, then I read a book, then I do science, I do math, after doing math I practice the piano, after I finished with the piano =

F: = you got a piano?

M: I have a piano in my house, don't you guys know it? … Don't tell me that you didn't know … I told Gabriel and Fernando … everybody]

(Unpublished data from Claire Kramsch)

The fact of owning a piano marks M as belonging to a different social culture than F who shows his surprise—and his distance—by using the dominant Anglo American language. M acknowledges her membership in that culture by responding in English, but immediately switches back to Spanish to show her solidarity with her Latino peers in the classroom, who come from more modest backgrounds. Refusing to adopt the same language when you are seen as belonging to the same culture can be perceived as an affront that requires some facework repair, as in the following

radio interview between two Black American disk jockeys (DJ1, DJ2.) and a Black American singer (SG):

DJ1: So whatz up wit da album shottie?
SG: What's up with the album *shottie*
DJ1: Oh, excu:::se me. How are things progressing with your upcoming album?
(laughter)
Come on, girl! you know what I'm sayin'. You KNOW you know da terminology! Don't front!
DJ2: Yeah, an' if ya don't know, now ya know
(laughter)
DJ1: Or at leas ack like ya know!
SG: I know, I know, I'm jus' messin' wit y'all.

(Unpublished data from Claire Kramsch)

Language crossing can be used also for more complex stances by speakers who wish to display multiple cultural memberships and play off one against the other. Not infrequently speakers who belong to several cultures insert the intonation of one language use phrases from one language as citational inserts into the other to distance themselves from alternative identities or to mock several cultural identities by stylizing, parodying, or stereotyping them all if it suits their social purposes of the moment. Thus, for example, the following stylization of Asian English or Creole English by Pakistani youngsters, native speakers of English, as a strategy to resist the authority of their Anglo teacher (BR) in a British school.

BR: attention gents
Asif: yeh alright
Alan: alright
Asif: yeh
Kazim: (in Stylized Asian English) I AM VERY SORRY BEN JAAD
/aɪ æm veri sɒri ben dʒɑːd/
Asif: (in Stylized Asian English) ATTENTION BENJAMIN
/əthenʃɑːn bendʒamɪn/
BR: concentrate a little bit
Kazim: (in Creole English) stop moving **dat ting aroun**
/dæt tɪŋ ərɒʊn/

(Rampton, Ben. Crossing: *Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents. Longman 1995, pages 115—6.)*

When speaking of cultural identity, then, we have to distinguish between the limited range of categories used by societies to classify their populations, and the identities that individuals ascribe to themselves under various circumstances and in the presence of various interlocutors. While the former are based on simplified and often quite stereotypical representations, the latter may vary with the social context. The ascription of cultural identity is particularly sensitive to the perception and acceptance of an individual by others, but also to the perception that others have of themselves, and to the distribution of legitimate roles and rights that both parties hold within the discourse community. Cultural identity, as the example of Edmond Laforest shows, is a question of both indenture to a language spoken or imposed by others, and personal, emotional investment in that language through the apprenticeship that went into acquiring it. The dialectic of the individual and the group can acquire dramatic proportions when nationalistic language policies come into play.

Linguistic nationism

The association of one language variety with the membership in one national community has been referred to as **linguistic nationism**. For example, during the French Revolution, the concept of a national language linked to a national culture was intended to systematically replace the variety of regional dialects and local practices. Between 1790 and 1792 a questionnaire was sent by l'Abbé Grégoire to lawyers, clergymen, and politicians in the French provinces under the pretext of documenting and cataloguing the linguistic and ethnographic uses of the thirty local'patois' spoken in France at the time. In fact, through this survey, the Jacobins established a blueprint for the subsequent systematic eradication of these patois. Historians have debated whether the conscious governmental policy of annihilation of local dialects in France at the time was done for the sake of national or ideological unity, or in order to establish the dominance of bourgeois Parisian culture over the uncouth peasant culture, or in order to break the strong cultural monopoly of the Catholic Church who catechized its faithful in the local vernaculars. Linguistic wars are always also political and cultural wars. Efforts by present-day France to cultivate a network of French speakers around the world, and link it to a francophone identity, or *francophonie*, must be seen as a way of countering the overwhelming spread of English by offering speakers a supranational cultural identity that is exclusively linguistic. French as an international language remains monitored by the Académie Française, a French national institution that is seen as the guarantor of cultural purity—in the same manner as English as an international language is monitored in scientific circles by Anglo-American journals who serve as the gate-keepers of a certain intellectual style of scientific research (see Chapter 5).

As we saw in Chapter I, it has been argued that the modern nation is an imagined community that originated in eighteenth century bourgeois imagination, and has relied heavily on print capitalism for its expression and dissemination. The modern nation is imagined as limited by finite, if elastic boundaries; it is imagined as a sovereign state, but also as a fraternal community of comrades, ready to take arms to defend their territorial integrity or their economic interests. This prototype of the modern nation as a cultural entity is, of course, a utopia. It has been mirrored by a similar view of language as shared patrimony, a self-contained, autonomous, and homogeneous linguistic system based on a homogeneous social world—in other words, a linguistic utopia. Such imaginings are tenacious and contribute to what we call an individual's national 'identity'.

When new nation-states emerge, such as more recently Belize, the mere category of national identity may, as a side effect, put a stress on other categories such as Spanishness or Mayaness, that in turn may acquire renewed importance, since the Spanish population and the Maya population do not coincide with the borders of Belize, but go beyond them to form new supranational alliances. This is what has happened in Europe with the Basque and Catalan identities that cross, linguistically and culturally, the national borders of France and Spain, and thus replace the nation by the region, and the national language by the regional language as units of cultural identification.

Nation-states respond to such separatist tendencies by refocusing national identity either around a national language or around the concept of multiculturalism. Current efforts by the US English Movement in the United States to amend the Constitution by declaring English the official national language have to be seen as the attempt to ensure not only mutual linguistic intelligibility, but cultural homogeneity as well. In periods of social fragmentation and multiple identities, each clamoring to be recognized, language takes on not only an indexical, but a symbolic value, according to the motto 'Let me hear you speak and I will tell you who you *are loyal to*'. The link between the US English legislation and anti-immigration legislation has been frequently pointed out by critics.

Besides being used as a means of excluding outsiders, as We saw in Chapter I, the use of one, and only one, language is often perceived as a sign of political allegiance. The remark 'I had ten years of French and I still can't ...' may be the expression not so much of bilingual failure as of monolingual pride. People who, by choice or by necessity, have traditionally been bi- or multilingual, like migrants and cosmopolitans, have often been held in suspicion by those who ascribe to themselves a monovocal, stable, national identity.

Standard language, cultural totem

The way this national identity is expressed is through an artificially created **standard language**, fashioned from a multiplicity of dialects. When one variety of a language is selected as an indicator of difference between insiders and outsiders, it can be shielded from variations through official grammars and dictionaries and can be taught through the national educational system. For example, in the times of the Ancient Greeks, any person whose language was not Greek was called a 'barbarian', i.e. an alien from an inferior culture. Hence the term **barbarism** to denote any use of language that offends contemporary standards of correctness or purity. In some countries that have a National Academy for the preservation of the national linguistic treasure against external imports and internal degradation, misuses of the standard language by its speakers are perceived not only as linguistic mishaps, but as aesthetic and moral offences as well (hence derogatory verbs like 'butchering' or `slaughtering' a language).

Note that standard language is always a written form of the language, preserved, as we saw in the last chapter, through a distinct print culture serving a variety of political, economic, and ideological interests. But it is well known that even though educated people will display strong views about what 'good' language use is supposed to be like, when they speak they often themselves commit precisely those barbarisms they so strongly condemn. The desire to halt the march of time and keep language pure of any cultural contamination is constantly thwarted by the co-construction of culture in every dialogic encounter (see Chapter 3).

Language acquires a symbolic value beyond its pragmatic use and becomes a totem of a cultural group, Whenever one dialect variety is imposed on others in the exercise of national or colonial power (France), or when one language is imposed over others through the deliberate, centralized pressure of a melting pot ideology (English over French in Louisiana, English over Spanish in New Mexico), or when one language supplants others through centralized deliberate planning or diffuse societal forces (the spread of English as an international language). The totemization of the dominant language leads to the stigmatization of the dominated languages.

Members of a group who feel that their cultural and political identity is threatened are likely to attach particular importance to the maintenance or resurrection of 'their language' (for example, Quebec, Belgium, Wales among many others). The particularly poignant death of Edmond Laforest is a reminder of the deeply personal association of language with one's self-ascribed cultural identity, especially when the recognition of that linguistic identity is denied. Laforest's despair

was compounded by the intransigently literate View that the majority of educated French (or those who Want to be seen as educated) hold toward their national language. By having learned and adopted the literate idiom of the colonial occupant, the Haitian poet may have felt he had betrayed not only his Haitian Creole identity, but also the rich oral tradition of his ancestors.

Linguistic and cultural imperialism

Laforest's death in 1915 acquired a new meaning when recounted in 1985, at a time when linguistic rights were starting to be viewed as basic human rights. The case for **linguistic rights** has been made particularly strongly with regard to the hegemonic spread of English around the world. Beyond the symbolic link frequently established between language and territorial or cultural identity, there is also another link that has more to do with the promulgation of global ideologies through the worldwide expansion of one language, also called **linguicism**. Linguicism has been defined as 'ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and unmaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language', as Phillipson says in his book Linguistic Imperialism (Oxford University Press 1992, page 47), in which English **linguistic imperialism** is seen as a type of linguicism.

From our discussion so far, one can see where the self-ascription to a given group on the basis of language might be the response to rather than the cause of the lack of material and spiritual power. It is when people feel economically and ideologically disempowered that language may become an issue and a major symbol of cultural integrity. However, as we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, in a world of signs where every meaning can proliferate ad *infinitum*, it becomes very difficult to distinguish what is the effect and what is the cause of linguistic imperialism. The spread of English is undeniable, and it is viewed by those who suffer from it as a totem for a certain Anglo-American 'culture' or way of life, but it is not clear whether the appropriate response in the long run is to make English and other languages into cultural icons, or to rely on the remarkable ability that speakers have to create multiple cultural realities in any language. This is not to say that linguistic pluralism is not a desirable good in itself. The Babel threat is not the splintering off in mutually unintelligible languages, but the monopoly of one language over others. As in Babel's days, the complacent belief that people are Working for a common cause just because they speak a common language is a dangerous illusion. Being human means Working through the Shoals of mutual misunderstandings across

incommensurable languages. That is why linguistic rights, like anti trust laws, have to be upheld, not because of the one-to-one relationship between culture and language, but because each language provides a uniquely communal, and uniquely individual, means by which human beings apprehend the World and one another.

Summary

Although there is no one-to-one relationship between anyone's language and his or her cultural identity, language is *the* most sensitive indicator of the relationship between an individual and a given social group. Any harmony or disharmony between the two is registered on this most sensitive of the Richter scales. Language is an integral part of ourselves—it permeates our very thinking and way of viewing the world. It is also the arena where political and cultural allegiances and loyalties are fought out. However, if language indexes our relation to the world, it is not itself this relation.

Because of the inevitable and necessary indeterminacy of signs, the same use of a given language can index both indenture and investment, both servitude and emancipation, both powerlessness and empowerment. Paradoxically, the only Way to preserve the room for maneuver vital to any human communication is not by making sure that everyone speaks the same language, but by making sure that the linguistic semiotic capital of humankind remains as rich and as diversified as possible.