

Knowledge about Language as Knowledge about the Time-Space Location of the ‘Ego’ in Social Environment

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I. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze the role of language knowledge as an instrument of human socio-political and cultural interaction. It is claimed that language is secondarily dependent on the social environment where spoken, which triggers scepticism, as regards the meaning of the term ‘nation-state’, and the idea of ‘language as the landmark of national identity’, in the contemporary context of United Europe and Globalization.

The research is based on the commonly accepted understanding of ‘knowledge about language’ as a binary opposition of ‘implicit’ : ‘explicit’, i.e. the non-awareness of the native speaker about the existing rules that he subconsciously follows vs. the awareness of their existence.

Implicit knowledge of language implies ‘changeability’, as an inseparable element of its poetic function, which means that ‘Homo Loquens’ is capable of creating ‘new language’ subconsciously. This is compared to the explicit knowledge of language as a representation of its metalinguistic function, which means conscious attitude towards the communication system. It is assumed that the poetic function of language, by getting into conflict with the metalinguistic one, helps to locate the ‘ego’ of ‘Homo Loquens’ in the actual present(time) and the actual social environment (space). More specifically: the poetic function of language is regarded as related to the integration of the inhabitants of a certain area with its own socio-cultural parameters as an instrument of identity awareness. By opposing the institutionalizing

power of the metalinguistic function of language, the poetic one ties up individual 'egos' in a language identity, on a deictic 'here and now' socio-cultural principle.

II. What is 'Knowledge about Language'?

Apart from the binary opposition 'implicit': 'explicit', language knowledge is also defined as a distinction between 'langue' and 'parole' (Saussure), or 'language competence' vs.

'language performance' (Chomsky), which focuses on the difference between the idea of language as such and its particular use. Language change, in its universality, has rarely been regarded as a source of tacit knowledge about language, let alone any connection with its creativity. If the basic priorities of human society are considered, languages shouldn't be changing, because of their role to maintain communication and understanding among the members of a certain group. But, they do change and, in the majority of the cases, they change as the consequence of changes in the socio-political structure of a certain population.

Linguists tend to explain the fact with an analysis of the mechanism of this change, i.e. the search of an answer to the question: 'how do languages change?' with seldom reference to the more important one: 'why do they change?'

A possible answer to this question could be found in the idea of the 'expressive' function of language as a form of 'human desire' (Kristeva). If language is not *a priori* referred to as a nothing more than just 'means of social interaction', it can be analyzed as a human desire for self-expression: the 'expressive' function of language, in the language signal, launched by 'ME' is supposed to trigger out a 'conative' feedback from 'YOU', directed towards a 'phatic' referent 'HE/SHE/IT'. A parallel with visual art, for example, with the pre-historic cave paintings of Altamira, will support the idea of the emotional experience of the 'ego', projected on the cave wall and shared, as a reference, with yet another 'ego' as a part of the process of interaction. Once projected, the 'expressed experience' gives knowledge about its own self, but remains, in the same time fixed there, unchanged 'on the wall', i.e. – belonging

to the past. Clearly enough, for an updated knowledge, and for a common apprehension of it – a renewed creation of updated forms would be necessary. It can be concluded that ‘language as knowledge’, just as ‘art as knowledge’, apart from everything else that it is believed to be, is a human desire for self-observation, that really integrates people, with a common understanding of the object of self-observation as a referent.

In this respect language change could be regarded as a complex process, combining:

1. The result of the necessity of the ‘ego’ to project his feelings and emotions anywhere out of his own self, and acquire knowledge about them from a distance;

And just after that, by cross-checking the experience with other ‘egos’

2. The establishment of the collective identity of people, sharing the same type of experience

III. What is ‘Poetic’ vs. ‘Metalinguistic’ in Language?

During the time before writing was invented, it was oral tradition that served as a source of socio-cultural knowledge. Myths, legends, sagas, heroic narratives, folk tales and songs, etc, functioned as the main tool for connection of the present generations to the past. The use of signs (alphabets) fixed the current language to the current stage of its temporal evolution, making it, in the same time, a matter of the past. Gradually, this caused discrepancy between ‘spoken’ and ‘written’ text. The latter was available only to highly educated ‘wizards’ and soon obtained the status of something ‘sacred’ or ‘magic’ not accessible to ‘ordinary’ people. Thus, the ancient signs used in the Rig-Veda, or the Runic ‘Futhorc’, for example, were perceived as a symbolic connection between ‘divine’ and ‘common’ knowledge. It is easy to conclude then that what basically caused the need for ‘updating’ the ‘written’ text to the ‘spoken’ one, ‘the discrepancy’, was followed by mysticism again, which gave those ‘who had the vocation’ the aura of the holders of special, almost ‘supernatural’ knowledge. Just quick reference to the historical fact that Medieval Christian religious centers were the basic places of knowledge distribution, is enough to clarify that the ‘sacred’ knowledge of

language functioned as the component of a religious activity in order to institutionalize a fixed stage in the language evolution and give it the status of ‘correctness’. On the other hand, this is how the demand of many religions, apart from Christendom, for leaving the text, respectively, the initial interpretation of ‘The Scriptures’, untouched and unchanged can be explained. (Throughout time this ‘institutionalized knowledge’, along with its ‘priority’ to issue ‘norms’, ‘standards’ and ‘regulations’ (‘rules’) was gradually transferred from religious to academic centers).

In other words, the metalinguistic function of language was discovered by our ancestors and was applied in order not only to keep human social interaction going, but, also, to manipulate and to govern people. But, not everything in language is just about social communication. The most amazing characteristic feature of language, if Chomsky’s ‘competence’ is referred to, is the ability to create ‘new’ language when performing, i.e. by expressing himself, The Speaker plays with language, and, what is even more, The Hearer understands him, even if the linguistic sign, used by the former, is absolutely new for him. What *is* social about all this though, is that both of them need (as it has already been discussed) a common cultural perspective in order to understand each other.

It may be suggested here that language change, as a way of expressing poetic desire for self - knowledge, maintains innovation, whereas institutionalized knowledge, based on the metalinguistic function of language maintains a tradition, that is directed towards the past.

IV. The Language Location of the ‘Ego’ in Time

In his desire for ‘breaking the chains of the ‘ego’ system, ‘Homo Loquens’ has to ‘balance’ his capacity for language change with the standards of institutionalized knowledge, or, in other words, to keep the balance between the poetic and the metalinguistic functions of language. In terms of native tongue acquisition language educators (usually parents) ‘institutionalize’ knowledge by following the pattern of ‘correct’: ‘incorrect’. A professional

linguistic interpretation wouldn't be that much different: it will probably refer to the existence of some 'rules' .

So, the metalinguistic part of our knowledge about language is directed towards institutionalized knowledge, which helps us notice the 'existing rules', whereas the creative element is based on the poetic capacity of language innovation. We use this capacity to locate our 'ego-s' in time here and now in order to distance ourselves from the restrictive force of institutionalized knowledge about language which is, apart from prescriptive linguistics, is largely applied in language policy and is often referred to by language purists and language nationalists. It is apparent that this type of knowledge is temporally orientated towards the past, simply because, if I am *here and now*, I cannot be *here and there now*, *I can (could) be there only then* (in the past).

In this respect, all possible forms of language change, due to the poetic function of language, classified as 'language corruption' throughout time, to start with Dante's 'De Vulgari Eloquentia', go through Samuel Johnson's policy of condemning language innovation, and end up with the modern term: 'bastardized', or, 'bodysnatched' language, could be, in fact, determined as absolutely legitimate knowledge about it, because they work in the socio-cultural deixis of here and now, whereas linguistic institutionalized knowledge is based on the past.

Language change, is, therefore, motivated by the innovative role of the expressive and the poetic functions of language and, in terms of time-location, can be noticed in the different stages in the evolution of one particular language.

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, the opposition 'langue': 'parole' implies that there is a certain continuity between the different stages in the existence of a specific language throughout time, where any metalinguistic analysis of the latest one is done with reference to the previous one(s), so that the designed initial message reaches the next coming generations.

It can be claimed, hence, that the separate stages in the evolution of a language exist in their own 'temporal dimension', as far as the shared socio-cultural context of the speakers is stable, to slowly and gradually shift to another one, that establishes new mechanisms of common understanding of the 'mutual referent' as the result of a new socio-cultural/political environment . For example, during the time when 'Beowulf' was written, the so-called Anglo-Saxon (Old English) language was characterized by features, that revealed a process of language convergence between the Roman–Celtic language substratum of the 'local' population and the adstratic Germanic dialects, spoken by the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians. This convergence came as the result of politically motivated clashes in the ethnolinguistic 'make-up' of Britain in the period between ca. 700 AD – 1000 AD. The language of 'Beowulf', as it was initially written, was the language of shared self-expression, restricted to the 'now' limits of the specific epoch of Germanic-Viking invasion, and, different from the one, used at the time of Chaucer, showing the traces of the Norman Conquest, and, respectively, the influence of Norman French and Anglo-Norman...or, the time of Shakespeare with the inkhorn terms and secondary impact of Latin and French, as the result of the specific political and cultural development of England during the Elizabethan Age... In fact, there is no evidence for an absolutely 'pure' ethnic language, because there are no 'pure' ethnic groups. As the result of different migrational waves languages get in contact with each other and understanding is possible when speech communities have too much in common in terms of cultural interaction: traditions, life-style etc. so that for a longer period of time, i.e. they get to know each other's 'language building bricks', when it comes to sharing the same socio-cultural 'mutual referent'.

Apparently, in a social environment where *I* can express the same type of feelings and emotions linguistically, that *You* can, it is the common socio-cultural background which ties *Us* both up as the inhabitants of a certain area into a society with its own parameters. The

more the inhabitants share equivalent socio-cultural values, the more they tend to develop a real group identity.

.V. The Language Location of the 'Ego' in Space

On the other hand, however, humankind has lived, for years, in groups, hostile to each other, in the division of a larger territory. This is what explains the fact that in some Indo-European languages the words for 'neighbor' are etymologically related to words, meaning 'enemy, foe, impostor'. This is how, in the case of Europe, for example, the antagonism between 'We' and the 'Other' developed into dangerous nationalism, especially during the period between Napoleon and Hitler

Europe is a place where a variety of languages is spoken, which may leave the impression that the above mentioned antagonism is based on the difference of 'self-expression'. In fact, the once extremely popular understanding of language as 'the landmark of national identity' is partially based on the 'division' principle, so typical for the nineteenth-century idea of 'nation-building'. In reality, however, there are so many 'exceptions to the rule' on the Old Continent, (as for example: German spoken in some many 'nation-states' other than Germany, or the case of Swiss nation with four different languages used within the borders of the state), that it may be assumed that 'the space location of the 'ego' of our Talking Man is, again, marked by commonly shared socio-cultural environment. Europe has been, for ages, sharing common socio-cultural constructs, not necessarily sharing a common language. There are plenty of examples from literature, music, painting and architecture, that illustrate why it is possible German born Haendel, to be considered one of the most remarkable British composers, or why 'Carmen' became the symbol of Spain, although created by the French: Merimé and Bizet, or how Russian born Henri Troyat and Elsa Triolet became famous French writers,...

In the 'United Europe' of today, where the population is intensively sharing a similar socio-cultural environment, the 'language-identity' criterium is irrelevant, simply because, speaking different languages on the same (relatively small) European territory, means that the common socio-cultural constructs are prior to language, when then phatic 'mutual' referent in the expression of emotions and feelings is needed. (In practice, this means that if the Dutch language and the Italian language reflect a common European reality, no matter how structurally different they are, the Dutch and the Italian speaker experience the same type of self-expression in the process of space location)

In general: Europe is a good example of how different languages could be shared on the same territory, in the process of space location of the 'ego-s' of its inhabitants.

On the other hand: the 'Lingua Franca' type of languages appear on the historical stage to fulfill the necessity of socio-cultural interaction around an area/territory with no common language. 'Lingua Franca' is a term, that was coined up to denote a kind of an 'interethnic' language, motivated by the needs of trade- and cultural interaction around the Mediterranean region. The term is often used today to denote a similar 'common means of language interaction' as the result of (a past) political hegemony. But, even if there is an initial political reason for the language dominance it loses it, and starts functioning as the symbol of the socio-cultural integrity of a certain society, for example:

The Athenian political dominance lasted less than a century, but the prestige of Athenian literature and of Athenian speech remained, and from it developed the 'koinē' that was indeed the common language of a large area for something like a thousand years'

The Latin of the Roman Empire used to function as a common means of cultural interaction long after the land of Julius Caesar and Nero collapsed

The Old Church Slavic, that was used as the official 'state' language of Mediaeval Valachia.

Modern Greek, used, in its time, as a ‘Lingua Franca’ in the Istanbul and West Anatolian regions of Ottoman Turkey

The Russian language of the post-USSR era in the Turkic republics of Central Asia, which now plays the same role that Arabic used to play at the times of semi-legendary *Turkestan*

And, of course, last, but not at all least:

The English of the British Empire and (American) English today...

Throughout human history there have been lots of cases where societies were shaped up on the basis of different ethnocultural strata.. What makes the specific ‘socium’ is not, therefore, the commonly shared language, but the commonly shared socio-cultural experience. Hence – in our contemporary world, where we increasingly share a similar social environment, language should be regarded as secondary and derivative instrument to match the needs of a society for common understanding.

V. Conclusion

By taking all this into account, this analysis shows that language provides people with knowledge about the location of their ‘ego’ (collective or individual) in the socio-cultural context of political environment and – therefore – can play an enormously important role in the modeling of its use in the modern world of a United Europe, sharing similar socio-cultural environment, with no common language as a *must*, and the trend for globalization on the other hand, using (American) English a common means of verbal interaction. Knowledge about language provides the individual ‘ego’ with the mechanisms of expressing feelings and emotions, that are relevant to the feelings and the emotions of other ‘ego-s’, but, as the above examples reveal and support, in the same time, the main thesis of this paper: humans need the common stimulus to urge them express the same emotion, before they give it a certain material shape. This is why, in terms of modern political theory, it is extremely important to be aware of the common socio-cultural background of today’s world (and the different way

of dependence of language on it), because, on the one hand, as late French president Mitterand claimed, in his speech given to the European Parliament : 'a new wave of nationalism in today's Europe would mean new war', and on the other hand: there are many to consider globalization as a way of Anglophone political and cultural imperialism. In this respect, knowledge about language, as direct or indirect knowledge about what is common, and not about what is different about humans, can be extremely important, in the understanding of the universality of human nature and human relationships.