

## Why Is Language Often Closely Related to Ethnic and National Identity?

### Introduction

As the Kosovo Report has put it, ‘[a]ny assessment of conflict involving ethnic identity requires delicate treatment of language.’<sup>1</sup> No doubt, language often plays an undeniable role in ethnic conflicts, which signifies its importance in defining one’s national, or that in a broader sense, ethnic identity. In this paper, we shall examine the links between these two.

### Two Approaches to Ethnicity

In order to investigate into the relationship between language and ethnic identity, or ethnicity, one has to first understand how the concept of ethnicity is indeed planted among an ethnic group.

Historically, the discussion of ethnicity diverges into two different opinions, namely the primordial and the instrumental perspectives. Traditionally the primordial view regards ethnicity as ‘constitut[ing] a fundamental feature of society and that ethnic identity is natural and unalienable.’<sup>2</sup> In other words, the ethnicity of a group is defined by its ‘cultural and biological heritage, and is territorially rooted,’<sup>3</sup> it is thus grounded by the group’s primordial ties and bounded by the ancestors’ values, myths, languages, etc.

On the other hand, instrumentalists argue that the primordial approach emphasizes too much on the objective nature of ethnicity, which stresses that ethnicity is ‘given’ and born with once a person comes into this world. They criticize that the primordial approach cannot explain the evolution of ethnic groups over time. Instead of admitting solely to primordial ties, instrumentalists emphasize that ethnicity of a group should be understood in terms of its relationship to other groups. This simply means that the members of an ethnic group identify themselves subjectively in relation to other groups in order to maximize their social interest. In Worsley’s words,

Cultural traits are not absolute or simply intellectual categories, but are invoked to provide [ethnic] identities which legitimize claims to rights. They are strategies or weapons in competitions over scarce social goods.<sup>4</sup>

Adopting the instrumental approach to ethnicity, the relationship between language and ethnic identity will be much more transparent to us.

---

<sup>1</sup> Independent International Commission on Kosovo, *The Kosovo Report*.

<sup>2</sup> Christ, D. M. G. (2003) p.27

<sup>3</sup> ditto

<sup>4</sup> Worsley, P. (1984)

## **Language as an Ethnic Distinction**

The instrumental view holds that ethnicity is a subjective way of interpreting a group's identity, often in the hope of maximizing the members' interest. In particular, a Han Chinese may claim to be of a minority group purposefully in order to obtain certain social privileges, and the Taiwanese, despite their Han origin, refuse to identify themselves as 'Chinese' in order to fight for independence.

However, in order to identify a group's separate and unique ethnicity, the members often have to in some way find themselves certain features which can distinguish them from the other ethnic groups. For instance, biological heritage, religious divergence and language difference are commonly cited as proofs of ethnicity. Theoretically, biological heritage seems to be a reasonable argument which sets an ethnic group apart from the others. Yet in reality, such claims often lack the support of historical records and are sometimes subject to interpretation. What is more important is that, claims on historical and sociopolitical reasons are not immediate indicators of ethnicity, meaning that the differences from the other groups are not immediately visible and must be traced and confirmed by additional effort.

On the other hand, it is safe to say that the very majority of our social life depends on the use of language, and the use of different languages naturally separates people into different groups, each not being able to understand the others. Lacking channels of communication, we typically identify others as being 'different' from us. This is what makes language such a prominent objective factor in defining ethnicity. 'To say language is to say society.'<sup>5</sup> Thus if you speak one particular language, you belong to that particular society. For instance, Mongolian and Chinese are two distinct languages, it thus seems natural to us in saying that Mongolians and Chinese belong to different ethnic groups, and that (together with other factors) creates a good reason for its independence in 1921.

Other than language, religion is another very visible feature of social life which differentiates people into groups. Yet, it does not surprise us to say that religion difference is often associated with language difference. As religion itself is a cultural product of a particular culture, it unavoidably bears certain emphases on the language of the culture which it originates from. For example, the official religion of Pakistan is Muslim, which regards Arabic as the sacred language. Therefore, despite the fact that

---

<sup>5</sup> Duranti, A. (1997)

the Pakistan language Urdu is almost linguistically equivalent to the Indian language of Hindi, it is written in Arabic script instead of the Hindi script, and is claimed to be a separate language.

From the above example, we see that the idea of language itself is sometimes not an objective fact, but a matter of subjective interpretation and is often employed purposefully as an ethnic distinction. Linguistically, every regional dialect is more or less different from the neighboring dialects. Even though we may normally regard these dialects as dialects of the same language, it is so easy to take this difference as the evidence of independent ethnicity once the speakers find this parallel to their interest. Consequently, this flexibility (or otherwise ambiguity) in defining ‘language’ creates its link to ethnic identity.

Similar examples are numerous. For instance, Serbian and Croatian, despite the slight divergence in the choices of vocabularies, are almost linguistically equivalent.<sup>6</sup> More examples are Flemish and Dutch, Macedonian and Bulgarian, Romanian and Moldovan, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian. All these pairs and triplet are examples of very similar dialects being identified as different languages.<sup>7</sup> Their separate identities are not linguistically based, but only due to the subjective will of the speakers.

## **Conclusion**

From the above discussion, we see that in reality, both ethnicity and language are not objectively defined ideas. Ethnicity is often subjectively interpreted by a group, and is thus a tool to fight for the social interest of the group members. Meanwhile, the very features of language serve a very good role in defining a group’s independent identity. On one hand, language plays a very important role in the social life, and limits speakers of different languages into different social circles. On the other hand, the ambiguity in defining a ‘language’ makes it handy to claim linguistic independence once the need is there. These factors are favorable to the claim of independent ethnicity, and therefore make language closely related to ethnic and national identity.

---

<sup>6</sup> Katzner, K. (2002) pp91-93

<sup>7</sup> McWhorter, J. (2001) pp68-69

## **Bibliography**

Christ, D. M. G. (2003) *Language, identity and conflict: A comparative study of language in ethnic conflict in Europe and Eurasia*, London: Routledge.

Duranti, A. (1997) *Linguistic anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Katzner, K. (2002) *The languages of the world*, New York: Routledge.

McWhorter, J. (2001) *The power of Babel: A natural history of language*, London: Random House.

Worsley, P. (1984) *The three worlds: Culture and world development*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Independent International Commission on Kosovo, *The Kosovo Report*,  
<http://www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/thekosovoreport.htm> .