

Some Psychological Underpinnings of the Nationalist Ethos
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“To bring attention to this sort of issues is to venture into the psychological factors that underlie nationalist beliefs...and here too the linguistic input is relevant”, I concluded [last month](#), promising to return to this issue in four weeks’ time. And to promise is to send forth, so here we are now.

What else can the linguist say about the nationalist phenomenon, then? As I was at pains to stress last week, the generative approach to the study of language constitutes a cognitive as well as a psychological theory of cognition, and in this sense, its theoretical tools can potentially characterise other mental phenomena, especially those that may be similar to language in one way or another.¹ This seems to be the case for a number of cultural customs, some of which are rather central to the nationalist outlook. Speaking a common language is often the key to developing a national identity within a large population (and thus to properly establish a nation-state), but other factors can be as important.²

The point of contact between language and culture as the linguist views these phenomena is the fact that the linguist’s is a story of how a collection of units and principles combine to yield a rich set of possibilities – mental grammars and the external languages they produce – and something along these lines appears to be true of some forms of culture as well. A number of examples can be found in some of the fields linguistics has influenced over the years, from cognitive psychology and sociology to philosophy. In *A Theory of Justice*, that well-known classic of political philosophy, John Rawls draws an analogy between the moral judgements people entertain in day-to-day situations and what linguists call grammatical judgements, the also common-enough ability to judge whether a sentence is acceptable or not in one’s own language.³ And just as the linguist argues that the capacity to draw grammatical judgements is based on a rich underlying grammar which native speakers are not privy to and whose study require the skills of linguists, Rawls wondered whether this sort of approach was also necessary to account for our capacity to draw moral judgements.

The analogy may in fact carry over to any domain of human cognition that involves some sort of productivity and replicability, as in the human ability to produce and understand many kinds of sentences in all sorts of settings – part of what Noam Chomsky has called “the creative use of language”. Morality appears to be such a domain, as evidenced by our promiscuous ability to judge the rightness of myriad situations, and much work has been carried out to flesh out Rawls’s linguistic analogy, the resultant theories rather similar in nature to those linguists have developed about language.⁴ Morality is but one of the bodies of beliefs a given culture encompasses, though, so there is ample scope for exploration.

Some theorists of nationalism have actually hinted at the possibility that Rawls’s analogy may be true of cultural customs *tout court*. Ernest Gellner, he of the modernist school of nationalism I drew from in last month’s piece, did once point out that there seemed to be some similarities between “language” as Chomsky and other linguists understand this concept and culture broadly understood as patterns of conduct. Gellner’s actual point was that just as humans and only humans have a genetic predisposition for language, there might also be such a human predisposition for culture and cultural customs.⁵ Thus, Gellner ultimately wanted to argue that cultural customs, belief systems, and social organisation are universal features in human communities, as is the case with linguistic abilities, and thus central to human nature, whereas states, nations, and nationalism aren’t.

This is not the place to develop the analogy between language and culture to any significant extent, but some general pointers pertinent to the study of nationalism can be delineated, which will suffice for my purposes. It may be possible, for a start, that cultural customs generally, from forms of behaviour and norms to belief and ethical systems, all of which appear to show a level of productivity plausibly on a par to what is possible in language, could be explained in terms of a linguistics-like theory.⁶

Further, the significance of the analogy between linguistic and cultural forms may not lie on how expansive the parallels actually are – how far “linguistic” theories can be taken in order to account for the relevant, non-linguistic phenomena – but on the import of the more basic facts regarding linguistic diversity and the status of individual languages. To wit, cultural customs could well be the result of the different possibilities that a mental capacity for culture confers, and this would explain why cultural customs in general can vary greatly across societies in some cases but appear rather similar in other, as per the expectation that the capacity itself is universal. Such a capacity for culture, or Culture, would explain how comes it that any person is capable of picking up any of the world’s cultural customs, whether or not this actually happens an accident of birth – as is the case with particular languages. And just as Language is underlain by “building blocks” from which the world’s languages are put together, cultural customs such as shared belief systems and the relations of kinship co-nationals do naturally form and cultivate from such beliefs, kinship a central aspect of the nationalist spirit which may also be the result of an underlying system similar in kind to the language capacity – the “mental” basis of kinship relations, say.

Of especial interest in this respect is the account of social relations the anthropologist Alan Fiske has put together over the years. Roughly speaking, Fiske argues that there are four principal models of sociality in the world’s cultures, all underpinned by basic properties of human psychology, and from which all possible kinds of societies are built up, much as the possible kinds of languages are built up from a pool of universal, psychological principles. As in the case of our capacity to generate moral judgements, the account Fiske and others have put forward for the units and principles of the mental systems underlying so-called “social cognition” is rather similar in kind to generative theories of language.⁷ Crucially, Fiske’s theory naturally extends to relations of kinship, thus potentially casting light on some of the “psychological building blocks” of nationalism,⁸ and *thus*, moreover, hinting at why nationalist feelings arise so easily.

The very idea that a nation is an imagined kind of community may be the result of the unconscious extrapolation that one shares the same *Volksgeist* with other, unknown members of a community, but this inference is only valid on the back of much mental baggage. Initially this is a purely cognitive phenomenon: it is specific configurations of the mental systems of Language and Culture that yield the externalisations we are so accustomed to calling the English language or Italian culture; and when these mental states become widespread, they provide the necessary common ground in terms of shared beliefs and ethics for kinship relationships to emerge, becoming a psychological phenomenon.

What may be peculiar to the nationalist phenomenon is the *uses* that the requisite external realities (spoken languages, cultural customs, etc.) can be put to by actual nationalists (i.e., by the promoters of nationalism). An analogy will clarify this point. Just as experimental psychologists are right to believe that there is a peculiar propensity in humans for certain kinds of behaviours, which in some cases are not difficult to elicit given some experimental conditions (a position behaviourism took to extremes),⁹ nationalists are also right to believe that, given a number of circumstances – namely, the imposition of a particular culture on a

population, and the accompanying belief(s) that there is, and there has always been, common languages, cultures, etc. – nationalist feelings can also be prompted, and easily so.

So framed, the idea of nationalism is derivative, *constructed* as it is from specific instances of the mental systems that underlie language, culture, etc., both in the few minds who first think of (cultural) nationalism and in the many minds who are eventually immersed in the actual reality of (political) nationalism. What nationalism appears to do, in general, is co-opt particular iterations of Language and Culture in order to bring about homogeneity in a population, but barring homogenisation, no widespread national identity would ever emerge.

Such homogeneity is not artificial in itself, for it is based on perfectly natural and ordinary properties of cognition – that is, given a particular language and set of customs, a child will acquire and master them in normal circumstances. What's quite artificial is the *imposition* of any kind of commonality on a large territory, a quite recent phenomenon in history, as I argued last month. And yet it appears to be perfectly natural to perceive, nay, to believe, that there is clear continuity in the history of any country, especially in regards to national identities, when in actual fact there is a quite large intellectual and political chasm across generations, the more so the further back we go in history.

This is on a par with the discontinuity I claimed last month is the norm when it comes to the history of a language, though perhaps in more dramatic a fashion; many people have no issue sharing and even taking pride in the past glories (and, sometimes, guilt) of previous generations of supposed co-nationals, even centuries apart, and this is slightly perplexing. After all, if there is no real historical continuity to languages and cultures when these events are viewed from the perspective of linguistics and cognitive science – that is, as core properties of cognition – then the chasm will be more significant still when it comes to national identities. People from different centuries often inhabit very different worlds, and the implication that anything travels down generations, from glories and egregious crimes to nationalist feelings and political entities or even social contracts, is certainly suspect.

The specific point to mind is the significance of the *belief* that there is continuity in political ideas and national identities and interests, regardless of the actual historical record.¹⁰ Much as is the case for the belief that one shares a language and some cultural customs with unknown members of a community, even from the ancient past, the belief that there *is* some kind of political and national continuity is plausibly also psychological in nature and therein may lie an explanation for its general acceptance. Relevant to this issue is a general principle of our belief system that Chomsky has discussed in his more philosophical works.¹¹

In the context of a discussion of how we understand and treat words and abstract concepts, Chomsky argues that there's a certain unity in how we think of changes to the nature of entities such as rivers and persons. Children have no problem accepting that the prince from *The Princess and the Frog* remains intrinsically a prince even during his conversion into a frog, for example, and we as adults do not cease seeing a river as a river when the water has frozen over. Chomsky suggests that we follow a principle of "psychic continuity" in cases such as these in that we appear to be tracking what might be regarded as the *essential* properties of an entity – the features that persevere through time, despite apparent changes to the entity's constitution (so-called *essentialism*).¹² Something along these lines may be true of how we think of nationalism as an idea, and by extension of particular nationalisms and national identities, though the analogy needs to be appropriately framed.

For a start, it is important to note that psychic continuity and essentialism don't apply to individual entities per se, but to classes of entities – that is, to the class of rivers as rivers or

to the class of princes as princes. Nationalism as a general idea about political allegiance to an imagined community of co-nationals rather than to a local community of present people doesn't appear to constitute a class of entities, but nationalism as a *particular* idea regarding which specific national community one is part of does seem to encompass a class – namely, the class of particular national identities. If so, national identities may function as the requisite *essential* ingredients of particular nationalisms, the very thing that would be natural to perceive as persevering down the ages. And considering, as I have argued, that any one national identity is the result of a specific cognitive configuration (the mental systems that externalise individual languages, cultures, etc.), it may be entirely unremarkable that the belief that a national identity travels down the generations is so common – and with this, the national interests and political structures so central, so the story goes, to one's own nation.

The result is three main beliefs that might well be regarded as part of the psychic continuity of nationalism – of the psychology of nationalism. Namely, the belief that there is unity within a present national identity; the belief that there is continuity in the history of a national identity, and indeed of a nation; and the belief, partly constructed from the previous two, that there is some immutable essence to any one national identity. These beliefs are pretty ordinary in themselves; the question is the effect of holding these beliefs *together at a particular time*. The case of language can once again illustrate what I am trying to convey.

Just as the same kind of languages possible today were also possible in the past, on the assumption that the capacity for language has remained invariant since the emergence of our species, the same kind of beliefs possible today – at least what may be termed “core beliefs” of human cognition, such as essentialist beliefs about natural kinds such as rivers and frogs, but perhaps not beliefs about, say, carburettors – must also have been possible in the past. Or to put the matter in a slightly different way, just as specific languages and not others are realised by the language capacity at particular points in time, certain kinds of beliefs, and combinations of such beliefs, can often also only be realised at specific points in time. In the case of individual nationalisms and national identities, these phenomena depend upon a number of beliefs and mental systems that, though ancient – beliefs regarding the act of belonging to a community, the linguistic capacity, whatever systems effectuate cultural forms and customs – their coming together in the way I am arguing is the case for nationalism only took place recently, and because of specific historical developments.¹³

There is a fair amount of “presentism” in the three beliefs I have identified, and presentist beliefs do appear frequently in the discourse of nationalists.¹⁴ My point is that the schism I have outlined is present in a general kind way. Continuity in language and culture is a matter of degree in some cases (e.g., from one generation to the next), but clearly of kind in many others (e.g., across different generations within the last 200 years, say), and this places the reality of national identities, and of particular nationalisms, in a peculiar context.

In the next two pieces, I shall discuss some of the philosophical repercussions of all this and will consider a particular example as a case study, that of Catalan nationalism, bringing this series of articles on the linguistic update of the study of nationalism to an end.

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¹ For the sake of this piece, and of this piece only, by a cognitive theory or phenomenon I shall mean the mental machinery that explains particular behaviours (e.g., the language faculty, for linguistic

abilities), while by a psychological theory or phenomenon I shall mean the beliefs and desires that purportedly explain such mental states as a national identity (a species of commonsense psychology).

² As I was also at pains to explain last time around, there is a lot of variability within any one nominal language and this has interesting consequences; the English spoken in Scotland is not the same kind as that spoken in England, for instance, and thus there is no impediment for two or more national identities to be related to what may be regarded as the same language. As I am trying to convey in these two pieces, national identities are bundles of different things – languages, cultures, etc. – and their identity conditions may be based on one or more of these features, but not necessarily all.

³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 40-41.

⁴ See John Mikhail, *Elements of Moral Cognition* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2011), for a “linguistic” account of the capacity for moral judgements, and Noam Chomsky, *Mind and Language* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge Universal Press, 2006) on the creative use of language.

⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism* (London, England: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997).

⁶ I’m putting to one side quintessential examples of cultural customs, such as literature and the arts, in favour of a discussion of ethical and belief systems, which are more central to national identities, though I think something of some relevance can also be said of so-called high cultural customs.

⁷ Alan Page Fiske, “The Four Elementary Forms of Sociality”, *Psychological Review*, 99 (1992): 689-723. Some linguists have actively contributed to this account too; for a full-blown contribution, with a complexity clearly reminiscent of linguistic theorising, see Ray Jackendoff, *Language, Consciousness, Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

⁸ Aviel Roshwald has written about the psychological building blocks of nationalism in terms of collective territoriality, solidarity based on kinship, and hostility towards outsiders, but I think these should be regarded as the outcomes of having internalised a national identity rather than as the mental fabric of the nationalist ethos, my interest here. Caspar Hirschi, *The Origins of Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 34 et seq., discusses Roshwald’s take.

⁹ BF Skinner, *Walden Two* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1948) is a case in point, for which Chomsky, “The case against BF Skinner”, *New York Review of Books* (December the 30th, 1971), offers the necessary deliverance.

¹⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 73-77, also discusses the belief that there is political continuity in a nation-state.

¹¹ See Chomsky, *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), for an extensive discussion.

¹² Essentialism is an old philosophical idea, traceable back to Plato and Aristotle, about how we classify and identify things. It has received much attention in modern cognitive science too; see Susan Gelman, *The Essential Child* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2003), who argues that children and adults construe classes of entities in terms of immutable, underlying essences.

¹³ As for the general idea of nationalism – namely, that one pledges political allegiance to a nation rather than to a local village or community – I would say that a further set of beliefs are at play, but I shall ignore this issue here.

¹⁴ The practice of retro-projecting modern circumstances, beliefs, and even languages and cultural customs, to the past, remote or ancient, could be part of the system of core beliefs of our species too.