What the Linguist said to the Nationalist

David J. Lobina

A number of issues in the study of nationalism ought to be widely accepted nowadays, most notably perhaps the claim that *political* nationalism – the idea that a citizen pledges allegiance to a nation-state rather than to a village or a town – is a modern phenomenon. After all, nationalism properly takes hold in a territory when modern tools such as universal schooling are employed to produce a national identity – the inhabitants of a territory must speak the same language and recognise a common culture if a nation is to surface – and this is a product of the last 200 years. A national identity doesn't come about on its own.

A particularly prominent aspect of how political nationalism does actually take hold in a large territory involves the central role a common language typically plays in the establishment of a national identity, a topic that has been at the heart of many studies of nationalism, though it is rarely treated in satisfactorily. Take two examples from the field of history, chosen almost at random but which nonetheless showcase some of the issues at stake.

The author and historian Adrian Hastings once argued that England was already a nation-state in the 11th century, which he claimed was the case, in part, through 'the stabilising of an intellectual and linguistic world through a thriving vernacular literature'.[1] The historian Caspar Hirschi has recently paid attention to linguistic exchanges between different regions of Europe in the Middle Ages to probe what these can tell us about how medieval peoples conceptualised each other, pointing out that, as a case in point, hardly anyone in medieval Italy could understand what the merchants 'coming from the north of the Alps were saying', and it was precisely because of this that these people 'were able to perceive the strange sounds as a 'common' language', presumably thus identifying a common people to boot.[2]

Such discourse is common enough and not too dissimilar to how laypeople talk of matters to do with language, but it is fact rather misleading and can lead scholars astray. In this sense, the study of nationalism could certainly benefit from the input of professional linguists. The generative account of language pioneered by Noam Chomsky in the last 70 or so years is especially useful in this respect, given its focus on the mental underpinnings of linguistic knowledge. Indeed, some of the questions such linguists have been interested in include how knowledge of language is represented in the minds of speakers as well as how this knowledge is acquired by children, issues that are apposite for the study of a phenomenon that is so dependent upon the formation and establishment of a national identity.

Before considering the linguistic contribution to the study of nationalism, though, it is worth delineating what may well be a consensus on such a study. From an etymological point of view, to start here, the English word *nation* derives from the Latin *natio*, which according to the Oxford Latin Dictionary meant "birth", or birthplace, and sometimes "a people" or "a class of people". The word entered the English language around the 13th century, and in Middle English, the form spoken at the time in England (and mostly by only *some* people in England), *nation* did for the most part refer to birthplace (or to the native population of a town). As for *nationalism*, the Oxford English Dictionary traces the first usage towards the end of the 18th century, with the meaning of "advocacy or support for one's own nation".

It is noteworthy that the word "nation" seems to have been initially used as a place name and only much later did the politically-laden term of "nationalism" actually appeared. Indeed, the feeling of belonging to a country that is regarded as one's own *political* home is emblematic of the nationalist spirit and absolutely central to the question of what makes a modern nation. As mentioned, nationalism as an ideology is premised on the idea that one's

loyalty is to a nation-state rather than to a local village, and such a position presupposes the identification of a country with a people and this has not been the case throughout history; a rather specific process is necessary for nations to emerge.

Two factors have been especially important in this respect, as Ernest Gellner has stressed.[3] The first is the development of what Gellner called a "high culture" and the marriage of the high culture and a country's central state. In early modern Europe, roughly the time period between the 15th and 18th centuries, a high culture meant the language, literature, and customs of the elites who were then in control of a territory – namely, the crown, aristocracy, and clergy – and thus the union of a high culture and the institutions of a state would have been a natural development in many cases. This was nonetheless the result of a long process: a properly centralised state required the early innovations of industrialisation in order to take form, and this only came about from the 18-19th centuries, and slowly.

The adoption of a literary language by the elites of a whole country also took plenty of time. Chaucer in England and Dante in Italy did much in the 14th century to establish their own vernaculars as the *linguae francae* of the elites they belonged to, but the very few schools and academies then in existence would have taken these languages up gradually. Dante in fact once noted that in certain streets of his native Florence he couldn't quite understand the language people spoke, a sentiment echoed by Martin Luther in the 16th century in the Germanic states.[4]

It all started to change during the age of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and especially towards the end of the 18th century, when schooling was made mandatory for everyone in the Empire, a first in modern history.[5] This is directly related to the second condition for the formation of nations that Gellner identified: the full effects of industrialisation and the social changes this introduced, including the invention of printing, which made universal and standardised education a reality. Crucially, universal schooling set off the (slow and often limited) process of homogenising a country, which was nothing more than the imposition of a high culture upon rather large communities, especially in terms of the language of instruction. In fact, the advent of modern nations has brought with it the replacement, and often disappearance, of an enormous cultural and linguistic diversity in order to establish a common language and culture, a somewhat underappreciated fact.

At the heart of these processes lies the central role a common language plays within any one national identity. As a matter of fact, a common people is rarely characterised in terms of common genealogy or ancestry – most countries are very heterogenous – and almost never in terms of history or cultural customs – a common past is more imagined than real, and customs vary greatly within any one region – but often simply in terms of language, as Gottfried Leibniz had already argued in his ethnographic studies from the 17th century.[6] At the very least, in fact, a common language is the medium in which all the supposed commonalities of a national identity are in fact taught, shared, and in time sanctioned.

A number of questions arise at this point, and it is here that a linguist can come in handy. To begin with, what does it mean to say that a group of people share a language? How does a language become the shared tongue of a people? How are children "born into", as it were, a language as they become members of their nations? And what *is* language, anyway?

Language as the linguist sees it is a mental phenomenon, a psychological fact exclusive to human cognition that lives within our heads. In order to study this mental reality, linguists usually draw a distinction between the *production* of language (in speech, writing or hand signs) and the capacity that makes linguistic production in fact possible, a view that has

shifted attention from the externally observed features of languages to the internal properties of the mental capacity for language – what Chomsky calls the faculty of language.

According to Chomsky and many other linguists, the language faculty constitutes a system composed of a number of primitive units (phonemes, words, signs, etc.) and various principles or rules that combine these units into sounds, sentences, sign sequences, etc. That is, the language faculty specifies an internal, mental grammar of a specific kind.

The theories on offer are quite intricate in character, but what this means in practice can be explained simply. Compare an English speaker with an Italian speaker. An English speaker has internalised a grammar of some 40 phonemes (24 consonants and some 20 vowel sounds, depending on the variety of English); phonological principles that combine these phonemes into allowable sounds in English; morphological principles that combine these sounds into acceptable words in English; and syntactic rules that combine words into licit phrases and sentences in English. An Italian speaker would be in possession of phonological, morphological, and syntactic principles partly particular to Italian, with a sound system of around 7 vowel sounds and 23 consonants. These two mental grammars are rather different and so would be what these grammars produce – the externalisation of language – making communication rather difficult.

The last point doesn't only apply to speakers of different languages; something along these lines is the case for speakers of the nominally same language as well. In fact, the reason two speakers of the same language can communicate with each other is based on the contingency that their mental grammars are very similar, though each person's representation of their own language is in one way unique. Any two people will vary in terms of their vocabularies, but also in their syntactic repertoires – disagreements regarding whether a particular sentence sounds OK or not in a shared language are not rare.

This take on what language is has resulted in particular accounts of how languages change through time and how children come to speak a native language. Consider the child first. A child is born into a busy environment, as the world is full of all sorts of sounds, only a few of which have anything to do with language. And yet by the time children reach the age of 5 they have learned the core aspects of the language they are exposed to: preschool children know a large number of words, can speak in full sentences, and understand most of what they are told.[7] How do children accomplish all this without much instruction?

Children appear to have many of the principles and rules of the world's languages at their disposal from birth, and what they seem to do while learning a language is select the right combination of these principles and rules so that their mental grammars eventually match the language they hear on a regular basis. Children try different combinations and make many mistakes, but by age 5 they have acquired the basics of their native language.[8]

Remarkably, this account of language acquisition is applicable to the phenomenon of how languages change in time as well. Just as a newborn has an immense range of sounds and phonological and syntactic principles to choose from, the language faculty makes this mental baggage available throughout the ages. Thus, language change can be described as a process in which populations of speakers tweak their grammars in various ways, with the resulting grammars passed on to the following generations via the language acquisition process. Speakers may change the sound system at one point, as in the Great Vowel Shift that Middle English underwent, according to which the long vowels then spoken, which were similar to those of modern Italian, slowly became the very different vowels of modern

English.[9] So viewed, the presence of a given language at some point in history is the result of a particular grammar being entertained in people's minds.

This perspective suggests an explanation for how people who live reasonably close to each other can end up speaking effectively different languages, as chronicled by Dante and Luther. All it takes is for such people to have slightly different mental grammars. The actual differences might be quite nuanced, as in some of the changes I mentioned from the history of English; changing the vowel sounds of a language but not its consonants (or not as much), as in the case of Middle vis-à-vis modern English, may not appear too drastic a divergence, but comprehension would not be assured in any way. In other cases different peoples could share some phonological principles but not many, or any, morphological or syntactic rules, and though the respective languages might sound alike, they would constitute different languages and comprehension would be unlikely, possibly in the same way the languages Dante couldn't understand in Florence must have sounded not too dissimilar to his own mother tongue. To put the point simply, what happens when a diverse group of people come to share a language (or not) is that they converge to roughly the same mental grammar (or not), and such eventualities require a specific set of circumstances (state centralisation and industrialisation, a universal education, or indeed lack thereof).

At the very least, then, a linguistic update of the study of nationalism offers a number of practical implications. First of all, the generative account of language provides an explanation for the observation that, left to their own devices, the population of a large territory would never end up speaking a similar language. Premodern countries were composed of communities that lived in relative isolation from each other, and such communities couldn't but develop distinct languages, as it only takes small divergences in otherwise similar mental grammars to produce different "external" languages. This was clearly the case in 11th century England, which as mentioned Adrian Hastings viewed as an early nation-state given its stabilising language and thriving literature, even though this is the century of the Norman invasion and the form of English that arose at the time (Middle English) was the language of a minuscule part of the population and strictly speaking a rather different language to both what preceded it (Old English) and what followed it (modern English). Myriad languages were in fact spoken in England at the time, much as was the case elsewhere in the world, even to this day (in, e.g., India and Mexico).

The linguist can also account for how it may appear that pockets of a given population appear to speak a similar, or even the same, language, when in reality there are a number of individual and independent languages in such a territory. It is the "externalisations" of the underlying grammars that can appear to be similar to an outsider and still remain foreign to the actual speakers on the ground; two languages may share similar phonological systems and nothing else, making them incommensurable. This is the situation Dante may have experienced in 14th century Florence, and it is very doubtful that anyone at the time would have concluded that the merchants coming from the North shared a common language, as the historian Caspar Hirschi has claimed, a situation that in any case medieval peoples hardly experienced in general within larger communities.

In fact, if there is a take-home message to be had from what a generative linguist can tell a nationalist is that talk of the English or Italian languages, or indeed talk of the history of the English or Italian languages, is mostly a manner of speaking and an abstraction, a useful way to talk about things that we find useful to talk about. Languages as we speak of them have no real existence outside of humans, they are not external objects exhibiting an extensive unity within a society and even less continuity in time. All there exist are the

mental grammars that produce languages and their externalisations, each mental grammar strictly speaking unique to each individual.

This is not to downplay the fact that in a modern nation people acquire languages that are quite similar; it is this very fact that makes the establishment of a national identity a reality to begin with. A common language, after all, makes it possible to share widely some of the phenomena central to a national identity, such as cultural customs, value systems, etc. And even though there is a great amount of heterogeneity in any one language, culture or nationality, it is not so much the actual facts of any culture, language or national identity that is important for the nationalist worldview but how these phenomena are disseminated so that they are *believed* to be common. A widely comprehensible language is the right medium to connect people from different walks of life in such a way. To bring attention to this sort of issues is to venture into the psychological factors that underlie nationalist beliefs – the psychology of nationalism – and here the linguistic input is also relevant, but this corollary will have to wait four weeks from now.

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[1] Cited in Caspar Hirschi, *The Origins of Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 34. Hastings traced the nationalist phenomenon back to the Middle Ages, often emphasising the contribution of the Christian worldview to the formation of European national identities (he was also a Catholic priest). The influence of religious affiliation has been discussed in many works on nationalism and it certainly has a role to play in the explanation of this phenomenon.

[2] Hirschi, *The Origins of Nationalism*, p. 12. Hirschi also sees the origins of nationalism in medieval times, though the form of nationalism he identifies is *cultural* rather than political – that is, the idea that a people share a common language and culture, supposedly prior to the kind of allegiance that political nationalism demands. As I will come to discuss in the main text, however, such commonalities will only have been true of minuscule groups of people within any one large region of the world until very recently.

[3] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1983). This brief outline of a consensus is mostly based on what is sometimes termed the modernist school of the study of nationalism. Along with Gellner's, Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) is possibly the other main work of this school. Both Gellner and Hobsbawm were rather careful when discussing how common languages come about, and in the case of the former, with a reference to Chomsky's linguistics, though not in the terms I have employed here (I will come back to this in my next post).

[4] Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008 [first published in 1577, but written in 1303-5]). See Hirschi, *The Origins of Nationalism*, p. 12, on Luther, who claimed that the variety of dialects then spoken in the Germanic states meant that people who lived within 30 kilometres weren't actually able to understand each other. It is worth adding that both Italy and Germany came into being in the 19th century and this required a significant exercise in social engineering, as hardly anyone spoke modern Italian or German in either country at the time.

[5] Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1983). Needless to say, the processes I am describing all started in Europe and were then exported to the rest of the world, in various degrees (this is *pace* Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* book, London: Verso, 1983).

[6] G.W. Leibniz, *Opera Omnia*, vol. IV, as discussed in Justin Smith, *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015). In particular, Leibniz argued that the only real differences among humans are to be found in the diverse languages that are spoken, and thus, that past ancestry could only be reconstructed from linguistic analyses.

[7] See, for example, Maria Teresa Guasti, *Language Acquisition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

[8] Charles Yang, *Knowledge and Learning in Natural Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[9] Albert C. Baugh & Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language* (London: Routledge, 2013, 6th edition).