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Possible peaceful existence of national and minority languages

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Abstract
This study examines whether it is socially feasible for a country to accommodate minority languages alongside a national language without this leading to tensions, violence or separatist movements. The aim of this article therefore is to discuss and clarify the relationship between national languages and minority languages, so that there is sufficient social space and appreciation for minority languages without detracting from the importance of a national language. This study comprises a review of the literature, beginning with the period in which national standard languages emerged and were codified, and culminating in the conviction that a country should be monolingual and that minority and regional languages should be eradicated. Particular attention is paid to the linguistic ideas of the French Revolution and German Romanticism. The violent consequences of such a policy of linguistic essentialism are illustrated by examples of the language disputes in Spain and Belgium. Next, again based on a review of the literature, the study examines the late 20th century response at (Western) European level to the violent actions of oppressed linguistic minorities. It emerges that a solution is sought in a specifically anti-essentialist approach, characterized by inclusiveness, diversity and tolerance. This approach is proving successful. The results show that a policy less focused on centralization and standardization can provide space for minority languages without detracting from the status of the national language, thereby preventing potential tensions and violent actions. The article therefore concludes with a plea to promote an approach, which emphasizes diversity and therefore tolerant attitudes.
Keywords: *minority languages, language endangerment, European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, linguistic essentialism, language policy*

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Возможность мирного сосуществования национального языка и языков меньшинств

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Аннотация
В данном исследовании рассматривается вопрос о том, насколько социально возможно для страны сосуществование языков меньшинств с национальным языком без риска возникновения напряженности, насилия или сепаратистских движений. Цель статьи — обсудить взаимосвязь между национальными языками и языками меньшинств, возможность обеспечения достаточного социального пространства для языков меньшинств без умаления при этом важности национального языка. Исследование включает обзор литературы, начиная с периода возникновения и кодификации национальных стандартных языков, кульминацией которого явилось убеждение в том, что страна должна быть моноязычной, а языки меньшинств и региональные языки должны быть искоренены. Особое внимание уделяется идеям Французской революции и немецкого романтизма. Последствия политики лингвистического эссенциализма иллюстрируются примерами жестоких языковых споров в Испании и Бельгии. Далее, также на основе обзора литературы, рассматривается реакция Западной Европы конца XX в. на насильственные действия угнетенных языковых меньшинств. Показано, что решение следует искать в антиэссенциалистском подходе, который характеризуется инклюзивностью, разнообразием и толерантностью. Этот подход оказывается успешным. Результаты показывают, что политика, в меньшей степени ориентированная на централизацию и стандартизацию, может обеспечить пространство для языков меньшинств, не умаляя при этом статуса национального языка, тем самым предотвращая потенциальную напряженность и насильственные действия. Статья завершается призывом к продвижению подхода, который подчеркивает важность языкового разнообразия и, следовательно, толерантное к нему отношение.
Ключевые слова: *миноритарные языки, угроза исчезновения языков, Европейская хартия региональных или миноритарных языков, лингвистический эссенциализм, языковая политика*

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1. Introduction

This contribution discusses the often-difficult relationship between national and regional or minority languages. History shows how the emergence of national languages frequently implied a depreciation of other language varieties spoken in the same territory. Moreover, emancipation of minority languages often entails a movement, violent or otherwise, against the standard language and the dominant culture associated with it. This article aims to examine whether national and minority languages can coexist peacefully, and what is required for this to happen.

It should be noted that this contribution focuses primarily on Western Europe and is written from a Western European perspective.

In this paper, the terms national, official and standard language will be used interchangeably, although they are not always complete synonyms. A national language is a language that is associated with a nation. An official language is a language that is legally recognized as the language of a country. A standard language is a language which has become standardized by law or by a standardizing body and therefore meets certain social and linguistic norms. Usually, an official language is also a national language and meets standardization requirements. As the differences are irrelevant to this article, the terms are used interchangeably.

This theoretical study begins with a brief explanation of the emergence of national languages in Western Europe, followed by a summary of nationalistic philosophical ideas about the relationship between language and nation and the connection between this idée fixe and beliefs about nation building. This jumble of thoughts and assumptions is known as linguistic essentialism, which assumes a one-to-one relationship between people, nation and language. In the next section, the focus shifts to the emancipation of regional and/or minority languages. A few examples are used to illustrate how this process has unfolded and is still continuing. In this context, we will briefly outline the European policy measures that have been taken to strengthen the position of minority language groups, which in today's social and economic reality are generally multilingual. From there, we will move on to the reality of individual and societal multilingualism, the acceptance of which can offer the possibility of a peaceful coexistence of national and minority languages, whereby both forms can be given sufficient room and uniqueness. In short, this article can be seen as an argument against linguistic essentialism. It addresses the following research questions: (1) how national languages have established their status and what this has meant for the status of other languages spoken in a country; (2) what the consequences have been of the resulting inferior status of non-national languages; (3) how these negative consequences can be addressed without undermining the status and importance of the national language(s).

2. The emergence of national languages

The idea of a national language is a recent phenomenon in the history of Western Europe. For centuries, no one thought or spoke about a national language. People spoke the vernacular of their village, city or region, and Latin was used for formal communication beyond the borders of their own region. The constitutional structure was also much less centralized and well organized than it is today. Europe used to be an unstable patchwork of kingdoms, principalities, bishoprics, early republics, duchies, counties, small states, and towns, all with their own authority structure, power, culture, and dialect. There was still no question of overarching national languages nor of central governments. Up to the Renaissance, Latin was the language in which official correspondence took place, in which scholars communicated, and in which the Roman Catholic Church and its believers prayed

and preached. However, from the 14th century different vernaculars started claiming their own place.

According to Anderson (1991: 37–46), the invention of the printing press and subsequent print capitalism changed society and introduced the concept of the national language of an imagined community and subsequently of a nation. Printed books require a standardized language and since printed books were aimed at a greater circulation than manuscripts and were also meant to reach a bourgeois audience, the language could not be Latin any longer. The dialects that were used in writing till then started to be organized into broad fields of communication and exchange and in a way became 'national' languages, Anderson claimed.

This view has been strongly criticized by among others Silverstein (2000) and Wogan (2001). Silverstein calls Anderson's concept of imagined communities an example of a specific Whorfian world view. His idea of a homogeneous language is as much imagined as is community, he criticizes Anderson. Wogan stresses that the western ideology of language sees literacy as its central symbol of national identity. According to Wogan, it is school-literacy which is deeply associated with the nation; however, school-literacy is a product of the 19th century. Consequently, the standardizing of vernaculars in the Renaissance is not the moment that the debate about the relation between language and ethnicity or nation started.

This does not mean that there was no interest in the mother tongue as an expression of a growing national consciousness before the 19th century. Van de Haar (2018) discusses the interest for the mother tongues Dutch and French in the Low Countries in the 16th century. She concludes that the multilingual situation of the Low Countries favoured the discussion about the question which language to use. The open interest in other languages stimulated the care for one's own, native, language. In addition, Protestantism with its emphasis on the translation of the Bible in the different mother tongues and its aim of enabling people to read the translated texts themselves had a positive influence on literacy and consequently on the interest and care for the native languages from the 16th century.

In other regions of Europe, one comes across a similar picture. In Italy the 'questione della lingua', the problem which regional variant of Italian to choose, kept scholars and writers busy till 1525, when Pietro Bembo managed to settle the issue in favour of archaic Tuscan. The founding of the Academia della Crusca in 1582/1583, which aimed at publishing an Italian dictionary based on this variety set the standard for the later national language (Perceval 1995: 150, Richardson 1995: 155). Burke (2004: 65) claims that the printing of Dante's treatise on the eloquence of the vernacular in 1529 set off a chain reaction in Europe, beginning in the 1540s. From then onwards till the middle of the 17th century every few years a new book was published which advocated the special qualities of another language: Italian, Spanish, French, Dutch, Polish, English, and German.

In France, King Francis I issued the *Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts* in 1539, by which he called for the use of French instead of Latin in all legal acts. Within a few decades a number of French grammars and dictionaries were compiled and

published. The names of the 16th century printers and scholars, father and son, Robert and Henri Estienne became household names in French grammatical studies (Kibbee 1995: 161–166). In Germany the Bible translation by Martin Luther, published between 1522–1534, eloquently advocated the right of the German vernacular. His contribution to the development of standardised German is sometimes even referred to as the birth of the language itself. (Lobenstein 2022).

In England the *Book of Common Prayer* 1549 did the same for English (Kelly 1995: 423). Also, the King James Bible had a major influence on the development of a common English language, but this translation appeared much later, in 1611. In the Netherlands the publication of the *Twespraeck van de Nederduitsche letterkunst of vant Spellen en de Eygenschap der Nederduitschen Taals* 'Dialogue about the Grammar of Dutch or about the orthography and the qualities of the Dutch Language' by a literary society in 1584 had a similar effect (Van der Wal & Van Bree 1992: 186– 188).

However, all these discussions were restricted to the literate members of the society. Neither the standardized chancery dialect of France nor the supra-regional German of Luther could be prescribed. The 'educated' vernacular remained the written language of a small elite. In addition, the debate was about the status of the 'national' vernacular compared to Latin and about which norms and standards were to be established for the different vernaculars, not about the priority of a national language above its dialects or about the assumed unifying power of a spoken and written national language.

> From the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, the links between language and nation become increasingly close and we find more and more examples of the idea that 'one language' should join the traditional trinity of 'one king, one faith, one law' (*un roi, une foi, une loi*). In 1768, King Carlos III of Spain decreed that there should be one language and one currency in his kingdom (Burke 2004: 164).

A heated debate about these issues started around the turn of the 18th and 19th century.

3. The emergence of an essentialist view

3.1. The German discussions

> In fact, from the times of John Locke (1632–1704), Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714–1780), Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791) and, perhaps more famously, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744– 1803) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) onward, the intrinsic relationship between language and nation has formed a stable element of both metalinguistic and nationalist discourse. The key cultural position of language during the rise of cultural nationalism and the formation of modern European nation-states led to intensified interest in the study of the 'national' language and literature (…). (Rutten and Van Kalmthout 2018: 10–11).

The debate about the intrinsic relation of language and nation is often seen as an exclusive German debate. However, as the names of Locke and Condillac in this quotation show, the idea that there is a direct relation between language and nation is not a specific German phenomenon nor is it a 19th century invention. However, the debate peaked in the divided Germany of the late 18th and 19th century. That is why we are focusing on the debate as it has unfolded in Germany.

In Germany, which was still not a nation state in this period, but a scattered country, a cultural gathering of principalities, small states, towns, and regions bound together by a common language, and thus more a *Sprachnation* (Gauger 2010: 117) or *Kulturnation* (Meinecke 1907) than a real nation, the philosophers Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and especially Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) claimed that there was a special one-to-one relation between nation and language. Herder, the father of romantic nationalism, is the instigator of this school of thought (Leerssen 2011: 156, Labrie 2012: 16/17 & 142–147). Herder introduced the term *Volksgeist* 'national spirit' and in this spirit language played an essential role, since it was the language that united all German speaking peoples and made them a *Volk*, 'one people'. Thinking along these lines, language is the soul of the nation (Labrie 2012: 145). In his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* 'Treatise on the origin of language' (1772), an essay about the first human language, Herder claimed that the different languages are necessary to keep together the different tribes in which groups of human beings lived. A one-to-one relation between *Sprache* 'language' and *Volk* 'people' is an immediate consequence of this view. The intrinsic relation between language and nation became commonplace in German thinking at the time. Wilhelm von Humboldt strongly articulated this idea in an often-quoted statement from 1797 that has almost achieved proverbial status: 'Language is the spiritual exhalation of the nation' (Edwards 2009: 205). He also claimed that 'the concept of a nation must be based chiefly upon language' (Schaefer 2010: 5).

A few years after Herder passed away, the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, one of the main figures in German idealism and one of the founders of German political nationalism, presented a series of lectures in Berlin: *Reden an die Deutsche Nation* 'Addresses to the German Nation' (1807/1808). In these lectures, which he delivered in a French-occupied Berlin, he made an appeal to the German nation to unite. Germans shared a common language and consequently they should use their patriotism to unite the country, they should form one nation.

When Jacob Grimm (1785–1863), the father of German linguistics, had to open the first Germanist gathering in 1846 he stressed the special relation between *Volk*, people, and *Sprache*, language, again.

> Let me start with the simple question: what is a people? And respond with just as simple an answer: A people is the epitome of human beings who speak the same language. For us Germans this is the most innocent and at the same time proudest declaration (Grimm 1847: 11)

A few words later Grimm calls it a natural law that not rivers or mountains define boundaries between peoples, but language. The statistician Richard Böckh (1824–1907) even went one step further and claimed in his *Der deutschen Volkszahl und Sprachgebiet in den europäischen Staaten* (1869), 'The Germans' number and linguistic area in European states', that nationality is defined by the language of the individual (Leuschner 2018). The famous German linguist Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–1893) echoed the same idea when he equaled language community and nation (McElvenny 2018).

The emphasis of Herder, Fichte, Grimm, and their followers on the relation between nation-state and language made it almost impossible to have an eye for diversity. It was the national language that was celebrated, not regional variants, dialects, or deviant minority languages. The underlying assumption was, and quite often still is, that the world is divided into homogeneous ethnic communities, nations, all with their own homogeneous languages (cf. Blommaert & Verschueren 1992).

The 'ethnolinguistic assumption' (Blommaert, Leppänen & Spotti 2012: 3) that there is an intrinsic relation between language and nation, or in an even stronger form that language may be equated with ethnicity or nation, is based on an essentialist concept of language.

3.2. The influence of the French Revolution

As said before, the debate about language and nation is not an exclusive German phenomenon. In France, too, the status of the various languages and language varieties spoken in the country was subject of a serious debate, albeit from a completely different perspective. In post-revolutionary France, leaders realized that a large proportion of the French population was unable to follow political debates and therefore could not participate in the new revolutionary democratization process. This was because they did not speak and understand French, but rather Occitan, Breton, Basque, Flemish, Alsatian or Picard, for example. The dreamed equality of all citizens, which was one of the aims of the Revolution, was in jeopardy. Therefore, all dialects and other varieties should be eradicated and should be replaced by the language spoken in the democratic people's assembly, French (Grégoire 1794). This marked the beginning of a French education policy that prevailed until recently and sought to eliminate all language varieties except standard French (Van der Elst & Van Rootselaar 2004).

Since the French culture was the most prestigious culture in the 19th and early 20th century in most parts of Europe, this French ideological position was followed widely. Dialects, regional, and minority languages were considered retarded and did not need any protection. To the contrary their use should be contested, at least at school. At some secondary schools in the southern provinces of the Netherlands, for instance, it was forbidden to speak the local dialect till the 1930s (Hamans 2015: 60). Except for the use of Frisian, it took until 1975 before the first non-standard

language, the dialect of the city of Kerkrade, got a formal role at a Dutch school (Hagen, Stijnen & Vallen 1975).

This attitude towards dialects was not confined to cultures that looked up to French civilization.

> Native American children had to wash their mouths with soap when they were heard speaking their native language; similar forms of punishment were administered to Aboriginals in Australia and Africans in the colonial empires. The Finnish Sámi people had Finnish as their official medium of instruction until 1995 (…). (Blommaert, Leppänen & Spotti 2012: 4).

While the French revolutionaries and their successors aimed at emancipating the individual citizens, the goal of German philosophers, philologists and other scholars who propagated the ethnolinguistic assumption was the emancipation of the nation, of the collectivity of people who share a language. Just as the French culture was dominant in Europe, so German philosophy, philology, linguistics, and science was leading in the 19th and first half of the 20th century in Europe. The ethnolinguistic assumption thus found its way into nationalist movements all over Europe and beyond and became a strong weapon in the hands of nationalist independence movements and often still is.

3.3. The myth of national homogeneity

The two examples discussed here show how a national language ideology came up in the wake of the 18th century and how this ideology became predominant. The 19th and first half of the 20th century is the time in which uniform, standardized national languages were promoted. Apart from a romantic interest in dialects as testimonies of earlier stages of the language or as part of folklore, which gave rise to a new discipline, dialectology, there was no real interest in other language variants than the prestigious national languages. In this era of nationalism, a linguistic homogeneity myth (Watts 2012) prevailed in Western Europe and was considered not only as plausible but even as universally valid. Nations were or should be homogeneous, which implied that the people as well as their language should be homogeneous. The national language should only consist of a uniform *Kultursprache* ‘language of (bourgeois) culture’ with standards and norms and without variation; and secondly, next to this ‘Kultursprache’ there was no room for other languages or language varieties. This necessarily led to conflicts in regions where another language than the promoted and dominant national language was spoken. In the next section two of the most discussed language conflicts will be presented.

4. Protests by non-standard language speakers

4.1. Autonomy movements in Spain

The unification of Spain has a long history. Informally, it began with the marriage of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella of Castile in 1469, which brought

the most important parts of the country together in the hands of the royal couple. This was followed by the completion of the so-called Reconquista, or 'reconquest (of the occupied territories)' with the fall of Granada in 1492, which brought an end to Islamic rule on the Iberian Peninsula. However, it was not until 1716, at the end of the War of the Spanish Succession, that the formerly independent regions such as Aragon, Valencia and Catalonia were formally united with Castile to form the Spanish kingdom through the Nueva Planta decrees (Platt Parmele 1898/2006). However, a political entity is by no means necessarily a linguistic entity, if that is even desirable. The ideals of the Enlightenment, which in France led to the Revolutionary pursuit of a single language, also reached Madrid, and the Spanish king Charles III therefore sought to establish a single language for his entire empire, both on the Iberian Peninsula and overseas. By means of decrees dictated in 1768 and 1779, king Charles III in Spain established Castilian (Spanish) as the mandatory education language across his whole empire forbidding likewise any other languages.

> [T]he Bourbons [the ruling Spanish royal family] prohibited the use of languages other than Spanish in public administrations and schools in the lands of the Crown of Aragon (mainly the Kingdom of Aragon, the Principality of Catalonia, the Kingdom of Valencia, and the Balearic Islands), and this prohibition was recommended for the church, too (Ferrer i Gironès 1985).
> Prohibiting the use of any language other than Spanish, via Royal Decree of June 23, 1763, signed by Charles III of Spain in Aranjuez; the persecution of schools that used any language other than Spanish; and Spain's interference in linguistic matters in all aspects of life was carried out over the three following centuries (Calafat 2017: 158–174).
>
> The minutes of a meeting of the Palma City Council on June 24, 1801 discuss Charles IV's prohibition of performing theatrical arts in Catalan: in no theater in Spain may pieces be performed, sung, or danced in a language other than Spanish, and they must be interpreted by actors and actresses native or naturalized to these kingdoms, as directed by Madrid in the Royal Order of December 28, 1799 (Calafat 2019: 6).

Such widespread suppression of a distinct regional identity and language was bound to meet with resistance, not only in Catalonia, but also in the Basque Country and Galicia. That is why the Second Spanish Republic (1931–1936) sought a different path. It was the leftist leadership of this government that introduced the first statutes of autonomy for some regions in which the special place of their different languages was recognized.

> In the second half of the XIXth century, a growing regional cultural and literary romanticism appeared, also in the regions where a vernacular language was spoken. At the same time, a social and cultural recognition of the specific identities of the territories concerned developed and triggered a process towards a new and different territorial organisation. The political battles, and

> above all the civil wars of the XIXth and XXth centuries prevented a harmonious convergence of the two positions. During the Second Spanish Republic (1931–1936), a statute of autonomy was approved by the Spanish Parliament for Catalonia in 1931 and for the Basque country in October 1936. In Galicia the process was not completed owing to the dramatic events of the 1936–1939 Civil War. (Experts' Report, Spain 2005: 5).

However, when the Franco regime seized power in 1939, the process of recognition of (linguistic) minority rights stopped abruptly. The unity of the country became the main goal again. Autonomy was anathema. Anything which could be interpreted as an expression of minority rights was oppressed.

> With the proclamation of the Second Republic in 1931, Catalonia recovered a degree of autonomy unknown since 1714. In the dispensations of the 1932 Republican Constitution, the *Generalitat* [the regional government] promoted the use of Catalan for education, administration, communications and culture; in short, Catalan for a time enjoyed a relatively normalised status of which it was to be violently deprived by the outcome of the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939. The years of the Franco regime (1939–1975) were a period of severe repression — cultural genocide even, in the early stages — the effects of which only began to be countered as the regime slowly loosened its grip on affairs during the 1960s. (Webber & Strubell 1991:15)

It was not only Catalan and Catalonia that were oppressed by the Franco regime, although 'the Catalan language became a principal scapegoat for the ills afflicting Spain as a whole' (Webber & Strubell 1991:15). Franco's 'White Terror' (1936–1945) persecuted anyone who deviated from the norm: Catalan, Galician, and Basque nationalists, homosexuals, freemasons, intellectuals, protestants, atheists, liberals, and socialists (Graham 2005: 136). The oppression of minorities and their languages lasted till the end of Franco's regime in 1975 and the first democratic elections two years later. Oppression must be taken literally. The Catalan leader Lluis Companys was tortured and executed in 1940 (Tomàs White 2020). Distribution of books printed in Catalan was forbidden. Priests who spoke Galician to a foreigner were banished to small remote hamlets in the mountains, as the Dutch geologist Kroonenberg (2014: 290) experienced. The Basque linguist Itziar Laka told how her grandmother had to spend a night in jail, since she had dared to speak Basque in public to an acquaintance from a village who did not speak Spanish (Hamans 2015: 62). During the Franco regime, Spain believed in the dogma of *homogeneism* (Blommaert and Verschueren 1991), which is a view of society in which differences are seen as dangerous and centrifugal. The recent controversies between the region of Catalunya and the central Spanish government shows that the dogma or, maybe better, the dream of homogeneism is still alive in some more conservative circles.

The effect of the Franco policy was the rise of protest movements. In the Basque country, for instance, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna 'Basque Homeland and Freedom', ETA, was founded in 1959. The protests of the Eta were not limited to

verbal statements. In the almost fifty years of ETA resistance more than 800 people got killed (Winkels 2017). The protest from the side of the Catalonian and Galician autonomy movements was of a less terrorist character, although these groups also committed bomb attacks. The Catalan movement Terra Lliure or TLL 'Free Land' was active between 1978 and 1995. Between 1979 and 1992, TLL committed almost 150 bomb attacks (Segura Julian 2017: 45), fortunately without many victims. The Galician Loita Armada Revolucionaria, LAR, 'Revolutionary Armed Struggle', and its predecessors and successors not only aimed at autonomy or independence but also had an extreme leftist signature. Their 137 attacks registered from 2005 to 2013 have left six wounded and one premeditated death (Cabrera 2024).

The internal conflicts in Spain were not exclusively linguistic in nature, but the prohibition of their own language played an enormous role in the struggle of minorities for autonomy. After Franco's death in 1975 the new democratic government led by social-democrats took a different direction and consulted with representatives of minority movements, which led to a new constitution (1978) in which Article 2 granted a certain autonomy to nationalities and territories that make up the country (cf. Devolution 2014). This new approach led to a 'result [which] is widely viewed as a success today. Since the end of the Franco era, Spain has been largely peaceful, stable, and democratic' (Devolution 2014: 19). However, in 2010 the Spanish Constitutional Court, in which conservative Spanish nationalists are still in the majority, rejected a new Catalan statute for autonomy after four years of deliberation. This statute was approved by the Catalan Parliament in 2005, the Spanish Congress in 2006, and subsequently ratified by a majority vote in a referendum. However, the conservative nationalist Partido Popular which adheres to a centralist view of homogeneism inherited from Franco's regime, appealed, and the appeal was upheld by the Court (Nationalia 2010). The ruling of the Court met with opposition in Catalonia and led to a reinforcement of separatist ideas, creating new unrest and political turmoil, that has still not been definitively resolved.

4.2. The Belgian language dispute

Belgium became independent in 1830. Before that, the country had been under Austrian rule for a long time, then under French rule for a few decades after the French Revolution, and subsequently it was part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands for a short time. With independence came an official language, French. However, a great deal of the population did not speak and understand this language. In the south of the country, French and varieties of French were the daily language, whereas in Flanders the majority spoke different Dutch dialects, usually called Flemish. French, however, was the language of prestige in the whole kingdom. That is why the higher social classes in Flanders also spoke French. Quite often they even gave up their local, Flemish, dialect completely. French became the only accepted language in government and in the army, and thus also became the language of education.

Already in 1840, a group of prominent people from Flanders protested the hegemony of French. They started a petition in which they asked for recognition of Dutch in education, administration, and court in Flanders. They did not opt for a Flemish national language because there was no standard language in the Flemish regions. Insofar as there was a standard used by the more educated, it was Dutch. The francophone prime minister Rogiers, however, answered that a monolingual Belgium, with French as its official language, was a necessity. The protesters did not accept this and continued to fight for the recognition of Dutch which they considered the standard language covering their dialects and for equal rights for the speakers of Flemish. This led to the victory of a Flemish coalition in the local Antwerp elections of 1866. Consequently, Dutch became the language of the local administration in this city (Hamans 2016: 48–51).

This success of the Flemish Movement, however, did not change the national language situation. In 1860 two Flemish workers were sentenced for murder and beheaded after a completely French-speaking court trial. Even their lawyers spoke French only. A year later it turned out that the two were innocent. Twelve years later, a monolingual Dutch-speaking labourer wanted to declare the birth of his son. He only knew Dutch, so he wanted to fulfil his duty in Dutch, which turned out to be impossible. He was even fined by the court. As can be imagined, this incident sparked much commotion. Protest marches and riots were the result. The government reacted with a first language law in 1873.

The law did not end the language conflicts, especially not because the Frenchification of public and social life in Flanders continued. French remained not only the language of the elite but also a language with a superior status. Therefore, everybody in Flanders who wanted to make a career had to learn French. Unfortunately, the top of the Roman Catholic Church in Belgium also was francophone and did not support the case of Dutch. In those days, Belgium was still predominantly Roman Catholic. The leader of the Belgian Roman Catholic Church, cardinal Mercier, still claimed in 1906 that Dutch was not a language of science and therefore never could become a language of higher education.

Despite all improvements in legislation, it took till 1968 that the University of Leuven, which is in the Dutch speaking part, accepted Dutch as the language of education. A protracted and violent student revolt was necessary before French was abolished as the first language of education. Still, not all language conflicts are solved. There are still problems and sometimes protest marches, violent protests and resistance, and political conflicts (Hamans 2016: 48–51).

5. A European treaty in favour of minority languages

5.1. The background of the treaty

Spain and Belgium are not the only two European countries where a language problem or language conflict manifests itself. Minority languages or regional languages occur practically everywhere in Europe, and elsewhere. Very often,

speakers of such languages feel disadvantaged, even though the modern school system almost always makes them bilingual, i.e. speakers of the national language and of their own minority or regional language.

In the Netherlands, for example, there is a Frisian-speaking minority that has had to campaign for a long time to gain any recognition. In Germany, there is a small Slavic minority, the Sorbs, living in the east of the country, but Germany also has a Danish-speaking minority in the north, where Germany and Denmark share a border. Low German, the language spoken in the northern part of the country, also has a lower status than the official language High German. France, which does not officially recognise or accept any minority or regional languages, still has minorities who speak Breton, Alsatian or Occitan and there exist several regional organisations fighting for the recognition of their language. In northern Italy, there have been quite a few problems, and even violent confrontations, in Alto Adige, where German is spoken alongside Italian. In Poland, the Kashubian minority is best known. Slovakia has a significant Hungarian-speaking minority in its eastern part. In Hungary, there live different Roma minorities with their own languages, and in Scandinavia, the Sami are an indigenous group with their own languages. And so on.

Because minority languages or regional languages are spoken in virtually all European countries and because almost all national governments, due to their focus on centralisation and uniformity, appeared to be unable to come up with solutions to the feelings of inferiority or discrimination experienced by speakers of non-standard languages, parliamentarians who were members of the Assembly of the Council of Europe took the initiative in the second half of the 1950s to draw attention to the position of non-national languages. Their hope was that a supranational body could be helpful in finding solutions.

The Council of Europe is not an institution of the European Union, EU. The Council is based in Strasbourg, was founded in 1949, and now has 46 member states. The work of the Council concentrates on the state of law, democracy, and human rights. It is therefore not at all surprising that the rights of (linguistic) minorities were studied and discussed in committees of this Council. One of the first initiatives was Resolution 136 on the 'Position of national minorities in Europe,' adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly in October 1957. The resolution was preceded by a report drafted by the Belgian socialist and former minister of justice, Henri Rolin (1891–1973). The report and the resolution did not deal with linguistic rights specifically but required attention to the rights of 'population groups conscious of belonging to a national minority in which another Member State is interested', such as the Danish speaking minority in Germany or the German speaking minority in Denmark. The Resolution had hardly any effect. Therefore, the Parliamentary Assembly adopted Recommendation 285, in which a committee of experts was asked in 1961 to draft an article which would guarantee several rights to national minorities. However, the Assembly was again not successful in its endeavors. The Committee of Ministers of the Council opposed the

initiative of the Assembly to introduce specific (linguistic) rights for minorities. Fortunately, the opposition of the ministers did not end the debate, although it took years before a positive result could be achieved. In 1989 the Assembly adopted Recommendation 928 on 'Educational and cultural problems of minority languages and dialects in Europe' in which the Assembly encouraged the Committee of Ministers to consider implementation of measures that would protect linguistic diversity. This recommendation was a result of a report by the Catalan socialist Alexandre Cirici I Pellicer (1914–1983).

These and many other initiatives, mostly taken by parliamentarians who came from areas where minority problems caused outbursts, led to the adoption of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1992. The Charter, a supranational treaty to protect and promote traditional minority languages in Europe, became into force in 1998.

5.2. The Charter

The charter is a European agreement concluded by national governments. They sign the treaty drawn up by the Council of Europe and commit themselves to certain efforts. The Charter is a treaty with two aims: a. to protect and promote regional and minority languages as a threatened aspect of Europe's cultural heritage and b, to enable speakers of a regional or minority language to use that language in private and public life. This means that national governments commit themselves to recognising, protecting and promoting the use of minority and regional languages spoken within their territory. They must do this by introducing appropriate legislation, but also by allocating budgets to achieve these goals. In addition, they must, of course, take measures to eliminate the disadvantages or discrimination suffered by speakers of these languages.

The Charter covers those minority and regional languages that are traditionally spoken within a country's territory. This excludes languages spoken by recent immigrant groups, but dialects of the standard language are also not covered by the treaty. Non-territorial languages, such as Yiddish or the languages of the Roma, that are spoken across national borders, and less widely used official languages, as for instance Swedish in Finland fall within the scope of the Charter.

The reason that languages of newcomers are excluded is that the Charter focusses on cultural heritage. However, reluctance to include the political reality of migration in the agreement cannot be ruled out either. It is unfortunate that the Charter excludes dialects of the national language, as they too deserve protection. The reason for this is probably that it is difficult to determine whether a so-called dialect of the standard language is a different variety next to the language or rather a social or local variant of the standard language and thus part of the different registers of this standard language. Since the Charter does not define what constitutes a language and what constitutes a dialect, and since it is left to national governments to determine which minority or regional languages they consider

falling within the scope of the Charter, this approach already contains a potential conflict. Arbitrariness or political arguments may come into play.

An example of this is the refusal of the Dutch authorities to recognize the language of Zeeland, the southwestern most part of the country as a regional language, whereas some years before the languages of the eastern provinces and of Limburg, the southeasternmost part were recognized on the basis of similar arguments. The reason for this refusal was that the Dutch Language Union, a partnership between the Netherlands and Flanders in the field of language, was now involved in the assessment.

The Belgian position, that the Charter jeopardised the hard-won equilibrium between the Flemish-speaking and French-speaking communities, now influenced the assessment of Zeeland's application. In fact, the Language Union wanted no language variant spoken within the Dutch language border to be regarded as a separate language, but only as a dialect of Dutch. The unspoken assumption here was that any other language variety spoken on Flemish-Belgian soil could, at most, be classified as a dialect of standard Dutch (Hamans 2015: 64–72).

6. Fear of bilingualism

Belgium has never signed or ratified the Charter, even though it is a member of the Council of Europe. This is a consequence of the Belgian language dispute. In Belgium, it has taken a great deal of effort and many intermediate steps to reach a situation in which the language conflicts are in balance and therefore manageable. Hence, the great fear among Belgian administrators that a single small change could cause the whole house of cards to collapse and reignite the language conflicts.

In the past, Belgian citizens had the personal choice of which language they wanted to use and in which they wanted to be addressed, French or Dutch. That is why so many social climbers in Flanders, the so-called *Franskiljons*, opted for French. This principle of personality has been abandoned and replaced by a principle of territoriality. The territoriality principle says that the place where citizens live determines which language must be used in official communication. And it is the number of citizens who speak a particular language that determines which language area a place belongs to. Where the majority speak Flemish, all official communication is in Dutch; where the majority speak French or German, the official language is French or German. In this way, a clear language boundary could be established, except in and around Brussels (Hamans 2016: 50–51).

However, there are a few villages in the Voerstreek region, not far from French speaking Liège, but part of the Belgium province of Limburg, where Dutch is the official language, which has been the scene of a fierce language dispute that has even influenced national politics. Only because of the number of Dutch speakers the region has been allocated to the Dutch speaking part of the country.

The then secretary of the Dutch Language Union, Flemish sociolinguist Koen Jaspaert, explained why he and the Flemish authorities were strongly opposed to the Charter. A possible Belgium's accession to the Charter could mean that, as in

the Netherlands, the language of Limburg — the Limburg region stretches across both countries — would have to be recognized as a separate regional language. The implication would be, in his opinion, that speakers of Limburgish could no longer be counted as Dutch speakers. In that case, he believed, the number of Dutch speakers in the Voerstreek region could decline to such an extent that the area would have to be reallocated to the French-speaking part of Belgium (Hamans 2015: 68). In terms of language war, this would mean a loss.

This view stems from a misunderstanding, namely that of the monolingual speaker. Jaspaert put it in so many words: "one can only have one mother tongue" (Hamans 2015: 68). This may sound plausible, given that one can also only have one mother. After all, if the mother tongue is Limburgish, it can no longer be Dutch, and the number of speakers of Dutch decreases. However, the text of the charter does not mention mother tongue. Moreover, Jaspaert and the Flemish authorities may have been misled by the metaphorical term mother tongue. In multilingual cultures in New Guinea, for example, it is not unusual for a father tongue or another second or even third language to be spoken alongside the mother tongue, in which the children also grow up (De Vries 2007: 3–4). They are therefore bilingual or multilingual from an early age.

However, it is even more likely that this view is a consequence of 19th-century linguistic essentialism, which continued to exert its influence well into the 20th century. This idea of one people, one nation, one language, can lead to the preconception that citizens of a state not only all speak or must speak the same language, but also only one language, apart from foreign languages learned later in life. Moreover, linguistic essentialism presupposes absolute uniformity and homogeneity and therefore is a sad misunderstanding that may have had its value in the emerging nationalism of the 19th century, but which is disastrous in relation to the recognition of the diversity of people and languages.

The Charter advocates the recognition of diversity and distinction, but does not present itself as a means or, even less, as a call for separation or secession, as some adversaries of the treaty claim. On the contrary, where national governments are invited to recognize, protect and promote the linguistic diversity of their country, this automatically implies that this should be done within the framework of the state. The Charter therefore implicitly calls for the recognition of multiple identities and thus also of multiple linguistic identities, thus of multilingualism. Of an area, of a group, but also, where applicable, of individual speakers. Opposed to the compelling ideal of uniformity and homogeneity, the Charter presents the reality of difference and is thus primarily a plea for accepting otherness, and therefore for tolerance.

7. Discussion

The challenge is clearly to compare the status and impact of the Council of Europe Charter with the Program for the Preservation and Revitalization of the Languages of Russia (Kibrik 2021). However, these are incomparable matters. The

Charter is a political treaty drafted by legal experts, whereas the Russian Program is an action program drawn up by linguists. This means that the Charter focuses much more on the rights of speakers of minority languages, whereas the Program explicitly focuses on language preservation. Although the Charter is an internationally recognized legal document, its provisions can hardly be enforced due to the Council of Europe's lack of authority.

Consider, for example, the Hungarian government's lukewarm response to the Council's experts' criticism that Hungary continues to enroll children of Roma origin, whose mother tongue is not Hungarian, in schools for children with disabilities. Even after repeated warnings, this did not change, despite Hungary being the second-fastest country to ratify the Charter. (Hamans 2024: 271–274). Once implemented with state support, the Program of the Linguistic Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences will not suffer from such powerlessness, given the centralized state authority that characterizes Russia, in contrast to the Council of Europe.

Although the Charter offers dozens of opportunities and guidelines for supporting regional minority languages, it lacks the emphasis that the Program correctly places on intergenerational transmission. On the other hand, the Charter's focus on the use of minority languages in the media, and the implicit recognition that follows from this, is an aspect that would not be out of place in the Program. Both texts have one thing in common, and that is their emphasis on diversity and the role that language plays in a person's identity: 'Linguistic diversity is among the most important humanitarian legacies of humankind.'(Kibrik 2021: 508) and '(…) linguistic identity makes up an important part of one's personal identity' (Kibrik 2021: 513).

8. Conclusion: Multilingualism as a way out

Contrary to what 19th-century nationalist thinking traditionally teaches us, and as reinforced by the current xenophobic political climate, it is not the monoculture of a national language per community that is the norm, but rather the exception (Gallagher 2020). In African families, it is quite normal that three or more languages are spoken, just as in New Guinea. Cultures and countries where multilingualism is commonplace can be found all over the world. Countries with only one language, apart from dialects, are the exception rather than the rule. Young people in Western cultures often speak English in addition to their mother tongue, and since the introduction of compulsory education in the 19th century, every Westerner speaks the standard language of their country in addition to their home language and often to the language of the street or jargons or slang. In short, we do not need to look to exotic cultures to convince ourselves that monolingual speakers and cultures are exceptional. That is why the solution for the recognition of minority languages must be sought in abandoning the fiction of a monolingual culture with an official, national language that is standardized according to strict norms. Kibrik (2021: 520/521) is right to challenge the myth of monolingualism: '(…) any normal

individual, including small children, may have command of more than one language.'

Accepting diversity, and thus tolerance for different (linguistic) behaviour, is not the only solution. Languages are also threatened with their survival by economic or social factors. Endangered languages will not suddenly flourish if mankind, following the example of the countries of the Council of Europe, abandons its aversion to and depreciation of minority languages. Much more will have to be done. The European Charter lists a large number of legal, educational and economic measures that can be used and indicates how the use of mass communication can be helpful in defending, protecting and promoting minority languages, but before protection and promotion can be addressed, acceptance will first be required. In contrast to the still too frequent pursuit of uniformity, and thus the eradication of differences and (linguistic) diversity, an atmosphere of openness and tolerance must be promoted. This is not only a task for governments, but also for linguistics and, above all, for linguists. There is more to be done than documenting dying languages; linguists must publicly advocate for the preservation of diversity and thus emphasize the normality of multilingualism. In this way, there can be room for the coexistence of national and minority languages within nations, groups and individuals, with sufficient room for both national and minority languages and allowing both to retain their uniqueness.

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