



Babel

Young Writers' Competition • 16-18

Kiana Rezakhanlou, the 16-18-year-old winner of Babel's Young Writers' Competition, looks at the relationship between language and the idea of nationhood.

Language nationalism One nation, one language?

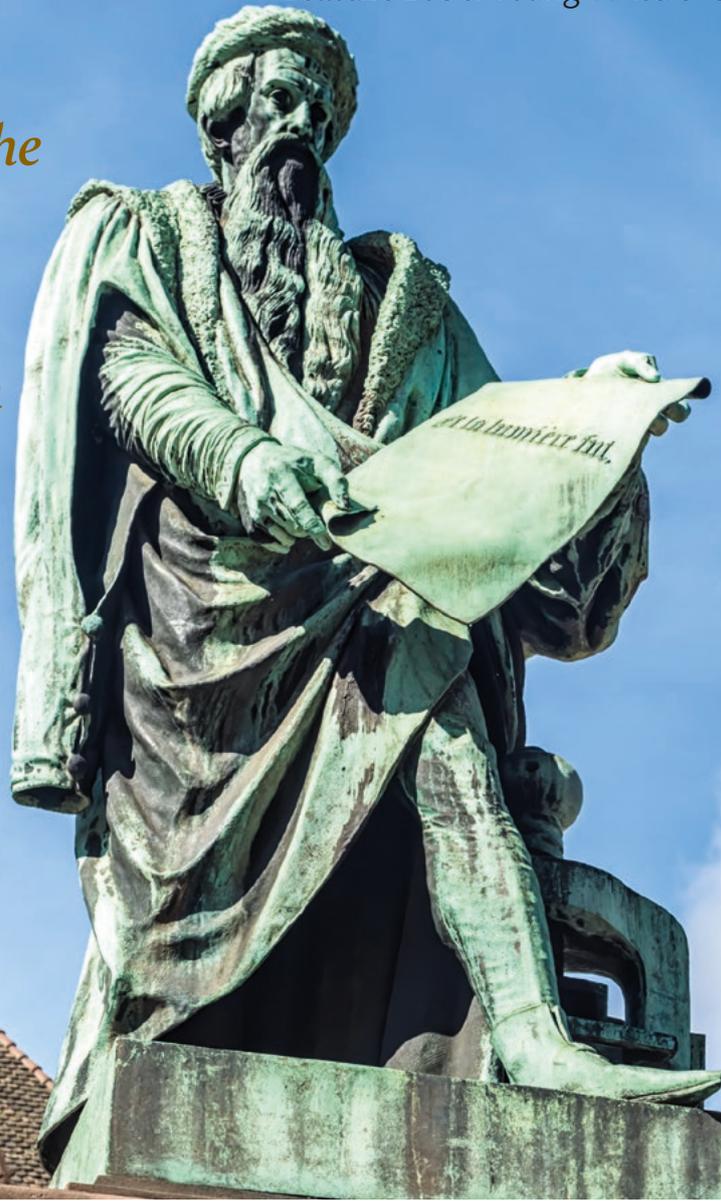
Language is intrinsically tied to identity, and this often includes the identity of a nation. The German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder asked: "Has a nation anything more precious than the language of its fathers?" And although many nations are, in fact, multilingual, pride – and even arrogance – towards language is a trait often found at the core of nationalist ideologies. Language stands alongside, or

perhaps above, architecture, flags and literature as an emblem of nationhood. The relationship between language and a nation is a fundamental one, as language is often used in the very creation of nations. The idea of a 'nation' has been legitimised throughout history partly on the basis of its citizens sharing a common language.

The ability of language to create instantaneous, even blind, unity is a unique one. Take the way in which playing the national anthem can turn

a group of strangers into a singularity singing the same words, keeping in time to the same tune and sharing the same belief that the national anthem displays their nationhood. The words need not be the most rousing, nor the most poetic, but the act of saying/singing the same words at the same time is enough to create a togetherness that is demonstrated in few other activities. This unity conducted through the means of language (and music) is not far from a mob mentality, which is why language

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can be a source and channel of nationalism as easily as it can be of a nation.

The birth of the national language

It is important to note that language has not always been directly linked to national identity. The transformation in the sixteenth century from using Latin as the language of government and authority to using the vernacular (the language spoken by the ordinary people of any given region) was vital in constructing this link. In the past, the well-educated had prioritized Latin, but now turned more towards their own

native language. As the quest for further religious dissemination heightened, vernacular language came to be preferred to Latin. The standardisation of these vernacular languages, and their subsequent promotion to positions in society that were previously held by Latin, allowed the relationship between language and its speakers to grow more defined. For example, Luther’s translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Ancient Greek into German amalgamated High German and Low German, and played a pivotal role in developing the Hoch Deutsch of today.

Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in 1440 was vital to the dissemination of national ideologies through language, though there is evidence of wood block printing before this in China. Before the press itself enabled mass production of printed material, what connection did the people within a nation feel towards one another, when no material bond existed between them? They spoke the same language, but regional dialects could be just as divisive as difference in language. The ability afforded by the printing press to spread material throughout the nation meant that such language

differences were smoothed over, or, at the very least, not made as ideological as they could have been; the garnering of information in the same way by understanding the same language solidified the nation, creating a common consciousness. It could be argued, then, that print language played a more important role in drawing attention to the need for a nation based on a common language than spoken language, which was less amenable to standardisation and therefore lacked written language's power to unify.

Cementing the concept of the national language was the nineteenth century Romanticism movement. This movement was focused, in part, on individualism and glorification of the past, and was prompted by a widespread Francophobia. Nowhere else was ethnolinguistic pride more accentuated than in Germany, by the likes of the aforementioned von Herder and others such as the philosophers Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Alexander von Humboldt. They championed the German language as a unifying force in the face of the country (France) that was most in favour of Germany remaining divided into a number of individual states and which had occupied German territories under Napoleon. In his poem *An die Deutschen* ("To the Germans"), von Herder penned his plea for German language distinctiveness: "Spew out the ugly slime of the Seine / Speak German, O you German!"

Here, the direct association of the German language with German nationality is clear, written as if the one could not fully exist without the other. For a nation whose unification did not take place until the latter half of the nineteenth century,

language was what bound people together in a way that nothing else could. But there is more to these lines: to stress the importance of national pride and upkeep of the German language, von Herder went beyond embracing German, disparaging the French language – "the ugly slime of the Seine". To unify Germany with German, von Herder distanced himself from all other languages, even the ones that may have existed within the German nation, which he boasted so proudly of.

The idea that language is central to any bid to invoke nationalism appears to have become naturalised. More often than not, language is offered as the defining, and singular, trait of a 'group'; it is what makes it worth setting them apart. Minority ethnic groups in larger countries who seek independence and autonomy within a state of their own almost always draw upon linguistic differences that exist between them and the majority. Descent, history, culture and religion are forgotten in these 'inter-ethnic conflicts' based upon language.

Nationalism in multilingualism

Nationalism, the movement to keep a nation as 'pure' and homogenous as possible, relies on an idealised model of society; one that is mono-ethnic, mono-ideological, mono-religious and mono-lingual. This begs the question: is it possible that a nation can retain any sense of nationalism while host to more than one language? How can a nation hold legitimacy without a standard, or idealised, indicator of its existence and conception: a homogenous national language? Most importantly, how can nationalism, with its 'us' versus

'them' mentality, even be considered in nations where, as a result of multilingualism, 'us' and 'them' both exist within the same native population? To answer these questions, it helps to look at examples of the dynamics within such nations.

The emergence of the Belgian state in 1830, rising out of what was previously the Southern Netherlands, allowed the French-speaking minority elite of Walloon to establish their dominance. Wallonia, where Romance languages were spoken, prospered and modernised, while Flanders maintained its agricultural and rural ways and spread Dutch (Flemish) as the language of the people. It was not only the Walloons whose dominance was asserted, but also their language; French was made the sole language of politics, administration and commerce in Belgium in 1831. The Flemish campaign and the spirit of resistance against assimilation was subsequently launched in 1840, and has remained active ever since, spurred on by German occupation during the two World Wars. There was partial success as Flanders secured unilingual status and was granted cultural autonomy in 1962, and thus the regions united under the nation of Belgium were entirely defined by the language to which they were affiliated: Dutch or French. As a direct consequence of historic Francophone elitism, Brussels hosts a bilingualism consistent with cultural conflict.

Even supposed national parties within Belgium target their potential supporters through language. This only serves to highlight the lack of alignment between these two regions: political parties do not aim to appeal to voters as a whole.

It was only when there was an influx of immigrants speaking neither Dutch nor French, those particularly of non-European descent, that the two linguistic groups began to define Belgian identity by banding themselves together, putting linguistic differences aside to focus on their togetherness with one another as 'Belgians' and their disconnect with the immigrants, the 'other'. The argument stands that those living in society together ought to hold similarity to the highest degree. French- and Dutch-speaking Belgians, on the whole, do not see themselves as a single entity, except when threatened by an identity more alien than the one group to the other.

Crucially, language recognition is what lies at the crux of such nationalism. If a language is not represented in legislation or government, it will inevitably fade from the nation's view of itself, bar the marginalised, isolated group who speak it as part of their livelihood and as a display of resistance. People need to know the language or languages they connect to the nation in which they live and where they come from.

The aforementioned law, which erased Dutch from any form of governmental jurisdiction in Belgium, built a nationalism that was initially limited to the Walloon elites. However, this nationalism has slowly but surely led to people seeking French as the key to success and the high-life. However, socioeconomic differences and inequality between the two groups put their objectives at odds. As a result, their ideas about their nation and what it had to work towards became incompatible, resulting in separatist tendencies, far from



Historic town of Dinant on the river Meuse, Wallonia, Belgium.

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anything related to a singular nationalism for the Belgian state.

Language and revolution

Just as language can be used as a means of bringing people together in peaceful circumstances, it can also become the forefront of a rebellion. Language has the power to mobilise the masses. An example is Ireland and the Irish independence movement. Douglas Hyde and the Gaelic League envisaged an Ireland that would be wholly liberated from British rule and everything that had been imposed onto the Irish people; this included separation from English.

Because a pillar of the Gaelic League's principles was that Irish liberation could under no circumstances take place through English, Hyde and the movement aimed to revive the daily use of Irish among the population – a population of which only 0.8 per cent was monoglot Irish speaker at the end of the nineteenth century. This necessity of de-anglicisation was borne out of the belief that the Irish language, repressed for so long, was the gateway to the restoration of Irish culture. Linguistic separation was the symbol of independence from what had been forced upon Ireland; an act of decolonisation.

It was only natural that this form of revolution took place: people revolt when deprived – robbed, even – of their language. The enforcement of

linguistic nationalism was, in this case, a direct response to English linguistic imperialism, an imperialism whose attitude resembled the sentiment written in John Eglinton's *Bards and Saints*: "It is fitting that the peasantry should have the language of a superior culture imposed upon them". In such circumstances, language was something that was imposed on a population; the assertion of dominance from a more powerful force in lieu of a natural response to a group of people and their unity.

A similar sense of revolt can be seen in the process and plea under which the former Soviet Union split into the nations that exist today. The transition from a Communist empire into fourteen distinct nations relied on the recognition of differences and individuality. Linguistic and cultural liberation within such nations required that nationalism be the route to self-determination, whereas native languages had previously played second fiddle to Russian, the official language of the Russian empire and the USSR.

As Russian lost its supra-ethnic identity, these countries, united by one language and one system, gained the opportunity to change the linguistic balance and strengthen their titular languages. However, de-Russification has not been a smooth process, due to the large populations of monolingual Russians in these countries.

In 1991, the fourteen nations contained 25 million ethnic Russians and 36.5 million native speakers of Russian altogether, Russians who had suddenly become unable to function in society with the language they held. Therefore, the popularity of Russian-language media continues within these nations, in spite of the nationalistic approaches of their governments. In Ukraine, as an example, the Constitutional Court's 2007 decision that all foreign language films should be translated into Ukrainian, through dubbing or subtitles, was a strange one because it included a translation of Russian – a language native to thirty per cent of the country's population and as a non-first language to the remaining seventy per cent.

Although linguistic nationalism has not always been successful in eradicating or erasing the aftermath of linguistic imperialism, it remains a display of repressed expression for nations, something to be

founded and thereafter protected at all costs.

Language is a multifaceted power: it can unite, bind, dissolve, separate and sever, but most importantly, its contribution towards national identity cannot be dismissed. Language has been used to protect some groups while dominating others; to give freedom to some, whilst taking it away from others. As long as the importance of language is upheld in such a way, linguistic nationalism will continue within nations, whether it seeks to synthesise disparate vernaculars in order to form a sole national language, or pursues a policy of eliminating competing linguistic influences in order to impose a single language. Although language serves as one cultural marker, one facet of what ties a group together, it also stands to be a sacrosanct aspect of group identity. ¶

Kiana Rezakhanlou is in her first year of Sixth Form at Haberdashers' Aske's School for Girls, studying German, Latin, English Literature and Mathematics. She hopes to read Linguistics and German at university.

Find out more

Book

On the relationship between the Irish language and Ireland: Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin (2006) *Language from Below: The Irish Language, Ideology and Power in 20th-century Ireland*, Verlag Peter Lang.

Articles

On the language divide in Belgium: Michael O'Neill (2000) 'Belgium: language, ethnicity and nationality', in *Parliamentary Affairs* 53(1).

More examples of linguistic nationalism within Europe: Jan Blommaert and Jef Verschueren (1992) 'The role of language in European nationalist ideologies', in *Pragmatics* 2(3).

EDITORS

We thought this piece from Kiana was a thought-provoking discussion of the role of language in nationalism. She manages to tread a fine line in a topic which is emotive for many and on which there are very strong views. We would like to add a few thoughts in order to frame this article in a wider linguistic context. We hope readers will engage positively with this most contentious of subjects. First of all, there is a question that arises in relation to Kiana's essay, which is the ideology of nationhood (as opposed to nationalism) itself. It may be naturalised as a good – or just inevitable – thing, but does the world really have no option but to be carved up into nation states and what would be the linguistic (and other) consequences of living in a looser arrangement of communities? Would the tension about language status disappear? Even as a thought-experiment, we think this is an interesting question to address.

Secondly, Kiana implies, but doesn't explore (it's not her aim, to be fair), the equally important question of language campaigning for cementing the identity of oppressed minorities. At Huddersfield we have been working on the Routledge Handbook of Language in Conflict (due out in 2019) and we have a whole section devoted to the question of 'which language' and how that impacts on conflict situations in places as diverse as Ghana, Chile and Lithuania. We also have a positive section on practical measures that have been or are being taken to ameliorate the linguistic situation in various settings, including a chapter on the increasing popularity of Irish language classes amongst the Protestant as well as the Catholic populations of Northern Ireland (see ebm.org.uk/turas/ for their work).

Congratulations and thanks to Kiana and all the other participants in our 16–18 competition this year. We look forward to reading your submissions in 2019!