Asserting ethnic identity and power through language

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Abstract This paper examines excerpts from interviews in which informants from six European border communities formulate explicit or implicit reflections on the ‘linguistic universe’ – including language use, linguistic diversity and language variation. Our results show that not only is linguistic diversity considered a fundamental element of ethnic and cultural identity, but that the very concept of diversity is used to assert, confirm or defend power interests. Evaluation of the individual languages is legitimated through apparently rational arguments incorporating marks of prestige or stigma which emerge from language attitudes based on linguistic prejudice and stereotyping. The linguistic ideology at work here is founded both on the concept of the ‘mother tongue’ (informants on both the east and west sides of the border claim that the unique ‘character’ or ‘mentality’ of each ‘people’ is created by their mother tongue), as well as on the ‘one nation, one language’ principle. This linguistic ideology gives rise to three key issues of linguistic ecology: the restriction of societal bilingualism to minority groups; the risk of minority language endangerment or obsolescence; and the close ties between the prestige or stigma of the language and resulting social power. In general, communities on the western side of the border are not interested in learning the language of their eastern neighbours. Eastern communities, on the other hand, are strongly motivated to learn western languages. The importance attributed to English as the ‘language of globalisation’ is common to both sides.

KEYWORDS: LANGUAGE ATTITUDES; LINGUISTIC PREJUDICE; SOCIETAL BILINGUALISM; LANGUAGE ECOLOGY; ETHNIC IDENTITY

Introduction and aims

Border communities constitute a reservoir of ‘natural’ multilingual and multicultural experiences (Appel and Muysken 1990; Baker and Jones 1998; Edwards 1989). Yet, as a result of a whole range of political and economic factors, such experiences are very often restricted to an ‘artificial’ monolingualism (de Bot 1993; Gustavsson 1990; Haugen 1972; Mühlhäusler 1996). Nevertheless, border communities offer a privileged observatory for the study of the relationships between language and identity, and in a deeper sense between dominant and dominated ethno-linguistic groups (Bister-Broosen 1998; Finger 2001). The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the ways in which our informants, from six different sets of East–West border communities, evaluate their own language(s) and the language(s) of the ‘Other’, and how they use and reflect on language as a marker of ethnic identity.

According to Ruth Wodak et al. (1999), identity can be considered as a mutable
process, largely constructed through discourse practices which are continually redefined and negotiated within and outside of the communities. The individual narratives reveal several of the collective thematic streams produced by the communities in order to claim or defend domains of power and interest.

All historical-natural languages, considered as internal linguistic systems, display equal potentialities; the essential difference among them is given solely by their social evaluation. Thus, according to their acquired and/or ascribed degree of power, some languages tend to be considered as more ‘prestigious’ or ‘dominant’ languages, whereas others are considered rather ‘stigmatised’ or ‘dominated’ languages. Obviously the symbolic markers of ‘prestige’ and ‘stigma’ are not absolute values; they may be seen as elements in a power-game involving confrontation and relation between the speech communities concerned.

The first generalisation which may be stated in our case is that the community languages situated on the western side of the former Iron Curtain are the more prestigious languages.1 Essentially this derives from the various structures of factual or symbolic power that support them, even more so after the definitive ‘fall’ of the political-economical system formerly under Soviet control.

Paradoxically, in our research there are twice as many ‘eastern’ languages as ‘western’ ones – the latter comprising only German and Italian. German, which has an international (but intralingual)2 use, refers to a numerically quite large linguistic community. Italian, though with less intrinsic power than German, nevertheless exercises a high extrinsic and functional power.3 Four languages on the eastern part of the border are considered but, at a mere quantitative level, the proportion between the two western and the four eastern linguistic communities is about three to one (circa 150 million to 50 million inhabitants). However, we will see later that the various degrees of power, that is the continuum between ‘prestige’ and ‘stigma’, do not depend solely on quantitative data but rather on symbolic orders resulting from contractual actions (persuasion, bargaining, force).

**Sociolinguistic situation of the selected border communities**

In terms of societal mono or bilingualism,5 the macro-sociolinguistic situation that can be traced on the basis of our field data corresponds to two different scenarios.

The first scenario is constituted by a border situation in which the ‘nationistic’ and ‘nationalistic’6 conditions on the western and the eastern border side have led to a de facto widespread collective mono/unilingualism. Thus the political or state border coincides today with the linguistic border. This implies that the members of the communities use their own national language, which – in their opinion – symbolises a firm and self-evident identity marker. For this reason it is possible to consider language and linguistic competence as key factors in the ethnolinguistic identity construction of the informants. ‘Otherness’ is clearly marked by a ‘foreign’ language. Individual ‘natural’ bilingualism is restricted to very rare and exceptional cases, occurring especially among the older generation.7 This scenario is concretely represented both by the German-Hungarian-speaking villages on the Austrian–Hungarian border (Moschendorf and Pinkamindszent), by the German-Czech situation represented by Bärenstein and
Vejprty, and by the two adjoining cities on the German–Polish border (Görlitz and Zgorzelec). The only difference between them involves the socio-demographic context, pertaining in the first case to rural settlements and in the second and third cases to small-scale and large-scale urban agglomerates. A similar, but rather exceptional scenario can be observed in the case of the two German–German communities, where the linguistic border (still) divides two different diatopic varieties covered by the same standard language. In this case, too, the informants have a clear and durable perception of the linguistic diversity of the ‘Other’.

The second scenario is the reverse: the linguistic border does not coincide with the national border, and therefore a varying number of minority language groups are dislocated inside of the majority group. This case is well documented by the Slovenian-speaking community of Gorizia, which has been living for centuries with the Italian-speaking community in Italy. A second example is the Slovenian-speaking community of Eisenkappel/Železna Kapla (Austria). This latter community, despite having formed for centuries the majority in the town, has been living with a German-speaking powerful elite and then suffered a Germanisation policy implemented from the beginning of the twentieth century. One must keep in mind their typological similarity: the minority language (Slovenian) is dominated by West-European majority languages – Italian and Friulian (with their different diatopic varieties) in the first case and Austrian German (with its widespread Carinthian variety) in the second one.

From this initial general picture we can infer that the phenomenon of language dominance is exerted by the majority groups over the minority linguistic communities that lie within western states; this is the case of the two Slovenian-speaking communities of our sample. These cases are directly exposed to phenomena of linguistic attrition, to the real and oppressive menace of identity shift, and to the phenomenon known as ‘language endangerment’ (Hornberger 2002; Mühlhäusler 1996; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).

Nevertheless, claiming and defending the spheres of interest and power are not only subject to quantitative aspects, such as the relation between majority and minority, but rather to more complex power games in which the relevant parts acquire their identity and counter-identity through the ways in which they co-construct their image in the mirror, that is through the eyes and the consensus of the ‘Other’. Socio-psychological phenomena related to the ‘language universe’ – such as the evaluation of the languages (or language varieties), and the individual/collective positive or negative language attitudes (e.g. the motivation to learn prestigious languages and the tendency to ignore less prestigious ones) – are connected with linguistic power exertion (Phillipson 1992).

We have indicated above that the symbolic power of a linguistic community is constituted by at least three factors: intrinsic, extrinsic and functional-structural power. Power never exists alone, but is always exercised through relations that, in their turn, respond to mechanisms and practices of persuasion, negotiation, or raw force. The different modalities are chosen according to the perception of conflict and/or contract conditions.

For the aims that are most important for our research reported in this paper, we have recognised some important thematic cores in the corpus of the interview narratives, in which the co-construction of identity is formed by the use of language and by reasoning about languages.
'Mother tongue' as a constituent element of the 'mentality' or 'character' of a 'nation'

The 'one nation, one language' ideology – the idea that a nation-state should be unified by one common language – has held sway in European history from the rise of the nation-states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries up to the present. The most numerous and intriguing considerations about language in this sense come from the communities where the linguistic universe represents the potentially permanent imbalance in power relationships, as well as the place where the claim to identity is laid (or was laid) and continues to demand affirmation. We can actually say that 'language' is a very hot and recurrent issue for some communities: namely the German-speaking community in Bärenstein (D), the Czech-speaking community in Vejprty (CS), the German-speaking and Slovenian-speaking communities in Eisenkappel/Železna Kapla (A), the Italian-speaking community in Gorizia (I), the Slovenian-speaking community in Gorizia/Gorica (I), and the Slovenian-speaking community in Nova Gorica (SL).

Less touchy an issue yet no less interesting is the situation for the others: the Slovenian-speaking community of Jezersko (SL), the German-speaking community in Goërliz (D), the Polish-speaking community in Zgorzelec (PL), the German-speaking community in Moschendorf (A), the Hungarian-speaking community in Pinkamindszent (H) and the Upper Franconian German-speaking community (former FRG) and the Thuringian Saxon German-speaking community (former GDR). At this point the narrow relationship between the themes introduced by the informant and the interest shown by the interviewer has to be highlighted. The interviewee never talks for her/himself, but according to the interest he/she believes he/she senses in the interviewer. The prominence of certain themes in each narration must therefore also be evaluated according to the scale of 'preference' (high/medium/low) of the interviewer. For this reason it is possible to state that the image of the interviewer is also mirrored in the texts of the informants.

Linguistic issues as a 'hot' identity indicator are expressed through assertions that language – the term 'mother tongue' is often used – forms the 'way of thinking' of its speakers, and thus the different 'mentalities' and 'national characters' are connected with the use of different languages.

It is well known (Ahlzweig 1994) that these 'folk linguistic theories', which are considered 'naive' today, were widespread in official documents in linguistics as far back as the end of the nineteenth century. This type of academic linguistics, far from being considered 'naive', had enormous impact in the years 1920 to 1960 in many Germanic, Romance and Slavic countries. Their theories were formally taught in schools and universities, and applied in nazi-fascist school-books to enhance the 'Nation’s’ perception of the distinctive traces of the so-called 'superior and inferior races'. These are theories with a high potential for immediate persuasion of the people precisely because of their explanatory simplicity. It is therefore not surprising that reasoning deriving from this matrix, though watered down, is used to negotiate advantages or to 'resolve' conflicts even today.

Many informants are convinced that it is the 'mother tongue' which determines thought, social behaviour, and exhibition or control of affection and emotions. Thus the confrontation between languages automatically becomes a clash of mentalities. For example, the Italian-speaking community in Gorizia
finds that Slovenes, whom they call ‘minorities’,¹⁰ are ‘insistent, penetrating and cold’, since their language is ‘glacial, aggressive and incomprehensible’. Likewise, the German-speaking community in Bärenstein finds there is a relation between the insurmountable difficulty in pronouncing and learning the Czech language (‘I thought I would make a knot in my tongue’ said one informant, speaking about his Czech-learning trials) and the incomprehensibility of the words Czech-speaking people produce. ‘They talk in Czech and one doesn’t know at all about what it’s about what they talk’. Once again, the German-speaking community in Görlitz claim to be frightened of all the Polish ‘hissing sounds’ (Zischlaute) that sneak into their words (‘zischen’ is the hissing of a snake that approaches its prey, crawling and unseen), and insist that these crawling and hissing sounds are found in all of their words, making them indistinct and unrepeatable. The Upper Franconian informants (the ‘Wessies’), in turn, interpret the ‘vulgar’ Saxon speech as the emblem of the impudent and pervasive settlement of the ‘Ossies’ in the West after the fall of the Wall, and their subsequent greedy appropriation of working opportunities. The Saxon speech, perceived in the West as a marked language choice, is indicative for them of the retrograde mentality of a once-colonised people who suddenly show upstart or colonising behaviour. ‘It is a bit like feeling suddenly surrounded by black people’ says an informant, whereas a lady cries out ‘Thank God I’m not a Saxon!’. It is therefore a language variety that appears to be most disagreeable and is identified with the character of that linguistic community.

In the following interview extract, an elderly lady from Bärenstein is narrating why all of the family went to Germany shortly after the end of the war:

‘We had not been deported, we had come voluntarily… my father said that his children should not become like Czechs [vertschechisiert] we just couldn’t learn anything over there… so, yes, when we had come back all my brothers and sisters were allowed to study.’

‘Vertschechisierung’ (‘Czechisation’) in the context of this narrative, is a synonym of relapse into a lack of culture. Thus, once they had all come to Germany, brothers and sisters, they could finally acquire a ‘culture’ by attending the schools they wanted, as the informant says.¹¹

The ‘inestimable value’ of their own ‘mother tongue’ is often underlined, mostly by the elderly. It is interesting to note, however, that in nearly all the Italian and Austrian families interviewed, some Slovenian-speaking relative (grandparent or husband) who inevitably possesses at least two languages of ‘inestimable value’, appears. Nonetheless and without expressing any doubts, the informants self-ascribe themselves to the dominant group. In turn, the Slovenian-speaking interviewees of the minority group tend to remark they are ‘Carinthians’ (in Austria) or ‘Goritians’ (in Italy), but of Slovenian ethnicity or nationality. Again, it is the language which makes the difference.

‘Our language makes it possible for us to have a different mentality’. This appears to be even more pronounced when the mother tongue has many centuries of life; this claim is repeated in nearly all the communities, but mostly in the ones that are actually more endangered (the minority Slovenian-speaking communities). The language, thanks to its long life, has had the possibility of moulding and carving the character of the nation. It is especially for this reason that the ‘mother tongue’ must be transmitted to the young generations, so as to preserve the ‘national character’. Indeed, the grandparents emerge as the holders of the mother tongue, and the ones who suffer most if their grandchildren tend
to unlearn it to replace it with either the language of the ‘neighbour’ or that which is considered the ‘language of today’ (i.e. English).

Sometimes the concept of ‘language’ itself comes into play. Several Italian and Austrian interviewees, when speaking of Slovenian-speaking minority groups, bring up the issue of ‘language’ or ‘dialect’. A closer look reveals that these concepts gain or lose power depending on the context of the narrative. For example, to subtract power from the Slovenian minority, German- or Italian-speaking informants claim that the Slovenes cannot feel particularly proud of the language they speak, since it is not ‘a real language’, but only a local idiom. In their eyes, this ‘idiom’ is not even worthy of being called a dialect, seeing that it does not even have a well-defined name. The Goritians use the indefinite collective term ‘slavo/sˇavo’ (Carli et al. 2002), while the Carinthians call it ‘Windisch’, indicating ‘people who were loyal to their Heimat’, and reserve the term ‘Slovenian’ to ‘traitorous national Slovenes’ (Hipfl et al. 2002). When, on the contrary, the Goritians or Carinthians speak of their own respective languages, they claim to speak the ‘Italian from here’ or the ‘German from this place’ or the ‘language usually spoken in the area’; or a clearly labelled autochthonous language variety, such as ‘Goritian’ or ‘Furlan/Friulian’ or ‘Julian’ or ‘Carinthian’. The use of a language name is fundamentally a strategy to attribute or detract visibility to/from an ‘ethnic’ group.

Several informants actually go through a double passage, of exclusion and inclusion, when evaluating a neighbouring country. An informant of Görlitz, Tanja Schmidt (old generation), gives an essentially positive picture of Zgorzelec but, comparing the two towns, adds:

I found it, Zgorzelec the richest town in Poland and I found that really bad, because the town does not look that rich … but you do notice that it once belonged to here, that it was once one town because even the style of the buildings and so …

So, as Tanja Schmidt says, compared to the nation, Zgorzelec is different from all the other Polish cities (act of exclusion); its diversity is due to the fact that it is not really Polish, but German; it has always been part of Görlitz (act of inclusion). Therefore in the vision of a ‘Görlitzer’ there is nothing to be surprised about if the inhabitants of Zgorzelec feel a duty to learn German; it is part of their ‘genetic heritage’, nearly a return to the mother tongue after the vicissitudes of history.

The concept of ‘mother tongue’ is well-rooted in the monolingual speaker: just as everybody can only have one mother, it is only possible to have one language. This oversimplified reasoning is easily unhinged by the ‘natural’ bilinguals, who as members of a minority group learn both the ingroup and the outgroup language. They are aware of the double capacity they possess and are proud of it, as this middle-generation member of the Slovene minority in Gorizia (in Slovene Gorica) shows:

There’s one issue, how to improve cohabitation? Cohabitation improve by/isn’t up to me and it isn’t up to us Slovenses, because er I personally don’t feel inferior, <on the contrary> (in Italian) I feel MORE superior, because I know at least and live in at least two cultures, no? There has to be a small desire er in the Italian mi/majority to get to know a little the culture of their neighbours, and it has to be THEIR desire to accept us. And since they have such a NARROW culture, since they only see their own culture, only speak their own language and can’t see beyond their noses, I consider them to be inferior to us. So in Gorica I feel – more important even though actually they, they, they, how could I say? Er, the administration and this treat me as a second-class citizen, because I’m Slovene, I feel a
first-class citizen and superior to any standard Italian particularly to those who are so narrow-minded, to some, how could I say, nationalists.

Significantly, the expression of pride occurs in a discussion about ‘How to improve cohabitation?’ [in Gorizia]. The key of the discourse embodies a conflict which nonetheless engenders an attempt at negotiation, consisting of a positive self-presentation and a bid to persuade ‘nationalist’ monolinguals, proud of having one mother and one language (and one fatherland), that bilinguals – far from representing an ambiguous guise of Janus-faced individuals – constitute a ‘cultural asset’.

On the other hand, even bilinguals of a minority language group often show pride in their ‘mother tongue’. This well-known phenomenon is related to oppositional culture and divergence between groups. Gregory Bateson (1972) invented the term ‘schizmogenesis’ to refer to the ethnic construction of a distinct and divergent self-identification.

**Projections and pre-judices as potential negotiations**

Both real and potential relationships between two border communities are often revealed through fanciful opinions – an upside-down reality – related to ‘the Other over there’, and following the motto ‘Through you, I see what I would like you to see in myself’.

Judgements or opinions expressed about the ‘Other’ derive more from stereotypes, prejudices, projections and even myths/mythemes, than from reciprocal contacts. Even if the ‘Other’ lives in the same territory, the we and the ‘Other’ are separated, or, rather, segregated from each other. These judgements reflect a generalised and epiphenomenic perception – not necessarily false or distorted – of the ‘Other’ as a global prototypical phenomenon where ‘all cats are black’; everyone is like the other, although they are a group of distinct, unique, individuals (Bateson 1972).

An important test for understanding the image of the Other in the discourses of the interviewees is represented by the attitudes expressed in their assertions about languages. The first interesting datum is the similarity of projections, judgements and prejudices expressed by different communities; some of them occur only in Western communities (which have the prestigious languages), some only in the Eastern ones, while others are generalised in all of them.

A preliminary analysis reveals two different typologies which emerge from the opinions expressed about languages (especially related to the language spoken by the neighbours). The first one concerns ‘glotto-aesthetics’, and it answers the question ‘What is language X like?’ The second one concerns ‘glotto-pragmatics’: in other words, ‘How useful is language Y?’. They are joined together in a single explanatory consideration: everything which is useful is also beautiful, that is, beauty is not beautiful in itself, but it is beautiful if it has a use. And this is the main point: that which is useful is used for many purposes, for example for increasing or improving ‘one’s own’ image or for threatening or diminishing the ‘Other’s’. In this way explicit or implicit judgements about the ugliness or uselessness of languages seem to come in particular, though not exclusively, from the discourses of dominant groups.

We have already mentioned the German-speaking community of Görlitz: all the interviewees say that Polish is difficult, incomprehensible and unpronounce-
able. The Austrians and the Italians affirm the same about Slovenian, the Germans about Czech, even the Hungarians about German. They all explain these assertions simulating some sort of ‘self-disfavour’:

We Germans are so lazy ... to learn a foreign language (Bärenstein).

The Italians are not keen on foreign languages, they over there are accustomed to do it (Gorizia).

I find it always incredibly impressive how the Poles speak German and how lazy we are ... I’ve tried, but I always blame my bad hearing for the fact that I can’t pronounce these ‘zisch’ sounds or rather that I don’t hear them properly (Görlitz).

French is quite easy ... because there is not so much der, die das ... and the letters themselves (Pinkamindszent).

Numerous discourses show that aesthetic comments about the neighbour’s language are generally not positive. In some cases a direct refusal, although hinting, at the same time, at both a strong emotional charge and self-disfavour, is expressed:

... because I hate German as a language. Generally speaking. Not because these are Germans I just don’t like the language. I learnt for half a year and somehow I couldn’t make myself like it. I am just incapable of learning German (Zgorzelec).

The arguments are underpinned by claimed properties of phonetics and orthography (‘they have all those sibilants, those strange letters’), or the linguistic impurity (‘it’s not a real language, it’s a dialect’). This last consideration is related to the utility of the language itself. Everyone agrees about the ‘universal usefulness of English’ over any other language.

In this context let us have a brief look at ranking of preferences. Nearly all the communities on both sides of the border consider German useful, but considering a broad international comparison some people, like Robert Seres, a young man from Pinkamindszent, prefer French or English:

We learnt German at the kindergarten, but I have completely forgotten that. Because I didn’t enjoy it. ... This hasn’t motivated me so much because the border is rarely open, I have been over there only few times. My cousin learns French, he said to me, he learns French and German, and he said to me that French is quite easy ... because there is not so much ... der, die das, there is not so many of these things in that.

Also, the young generation of Zgorzelec tends to prefer English instead of the neighbouring language (German), and at the same time they profess to be amazed by the fact that all young Germans love to learn languages.

If we look at the communities located on the western side of the border we can find two kinds of behaviour towards language, ‘one’s own’, and the ‘Other’s’. Let us examine each of these in turn.

The ‘Other’ and his command of ‘my’ language

Interviewees in all the western communities surveyed say that ‘over there everyone knows my own language’, and they add that this knowledge is not only superficial (for everyday relations) but deep and specific: they learn grammar, and they systematically study my language, maybe even at school.

People in western communities explain this widespread knowledge by saying that ‘the Others’ need to know my language, because my language is the superior one. So we can also find indices of implicit prestige in many interview quotes,
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like ‘my language is useful to find a job’ (especially on this side), ‘my language is more international than theirs’, ‘it represents a symbol of upward social mobility’; ‘the importance of my language forces them to learn it, and in this way they show practical sense, intelligence and cleverness, because they well know that the knowledge of the languages spoken on both sides of the border offers more professional and economic opportunities’. In this way (through an ambiguous notion of usefulness) they judge bilingualism positively, and they consider it as a source of better opportunities, but the ‘Other’ is always an untrustworthy entity. Only sometimes, marginally, is the knowledge of language seen as a means of cultural improvement and of attaining a better relationship with and knowledge of the ‘Other’.

As regards considerations about how the ‘Other’ learns our language, some interviewees say that schools activate language courses, while others guess that they learn language through mass media (television and radio); this second strategy should be valid for both directions, because on this side we should have the same opportunities, but no one here seems to be interested in this kind of learning.

For example, an interviewee (Bianchi, a young female) in the Italian-speaking community of Gorizia says:

You know, especially in the last years they had to learn Italian because the Italians brought a lot of money, ... everywhere they speak Italian, because the Italians go there, and they spend their money, so I think they know the language better than us. I don’t know if it’s because they learn Italian at school or because they need it in their life more than we need Slovenian.

The idea is that, as regards the ‘Other’, they absolutely need to learn our language, but this is not the same for us in learning their language.

A particular situation characterises the German-speaking community of Moschendorf, on the border between Austria and Hungary: the reciprocal invisibility of the ‘Other’ and the fact that Hungarian has never been a stigmatised language (on the contrary, for some time it was a dominant language, because it was even taught in the schools of Moschendorf before 1921) makes this community different from the others. During the period in which Hungary was part of the communist alliance, Russian was taught at school in Pinkaminzszt, and some people say that this was an obstacle for learning German. We also have to add that they had no motivation for social mobility (due to the rural environment and the marginal position of the two villages) and that the linguistic border coincides with the political one; these facts provoke a total indifference towards the ‘Other’.

We and the language of the ‘Other’

As far as affirming one’s own identity through language is concerned, we have seen that many interviewees, talking about their feelings when they are over there, report that they don’t have any problems, even if they don’t know the language, because all the ‘Others’ know theirs, so they can communicate (Görlitz, Bärenstein, Eisenkappel/Železna Kapla, Italian-speaking people of Gorizia). There are also cases where people claim that the ‘Others’, while in their own territory, keep speaking their own language even if they realise that I don’t speak it; this is interpreted as a ‘face-threatening act’, because it underlines a sort
of ‘property’, of ‘belonging’, and of the will to establish the rules of the game (Bärenstein, Italian-speaking Gorizia). This fact is particularly relevant if we consider that they are able to integrate in our territory thanks to the fact that they know our language.

The conclusive observation which can be derived through the interpretation of the data about the western communities is that people basically do not know the language of the ‘Others’, or, rather, that they don’t want to learn it, and if someone does know it, it’s only for specific or casual reasons (mixed marriages, some relative on the other side, and so on). People are not generally interested in learning the language of the ‘Other’, and the reason is, as we have already seen, its ‘uselessness’, or its low value on the ‘language market’. They only learn what they need in their commercial transactions. Justifications are not always explicit: the most common one is that the language is too difficult and so, even if they try, they’re not able to learn it well, and every attempt fails; but the ‘Others over there’ don’t have any problem: any language is easier for them.

An interesting myth, which occurs in more than one western community, is about our knowledge of the language of the ‘Other’, across the three generations. Some of our informants, belonging to the young generations of the Italian-speaking community in Gorizia and of the German-speaking community in Moschen-dorf – which were both part of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire – have painted a colourful image of an ‘old multilingual generation’, whose members, thanks to the historical conditions in which they lived, had the opportunity to learn and speak more than one language since their youth: their mother tongue, the language of the ‘Other’, and the official one. They lived in a sort of Eden, characterised by tolerance, respect and peaceful coexistence. The interesting supposition is that each generation (including the old one) transfers this myth to the previous one, and in doing so, in some sense, they deny what the younger generations affirm. This can be exemplified by the following extracts:

I think that in earlier times perhaps more people knew Slovenian. I can imagine that well. … I hardly know Slovenian at all. My mother knows it and my grandmother for example they all knew (Eisenkappel/Zˇelezna Kapla, young-generation female).

My grandparents spoke Italian, Slovene, and German, because that was the culture of that time, here (Gorizia, young-generation female).

It was really wonderful to hear discussions among our Slovene neighbours, when they met our grandparents, our farm workers here, and when they went together in the morning in their fields: they arrived there and when they met our grandparents they used some Slovene words, and they said ‘Bug dej pamet’ that is ‘God will give you …’ This was the way of greeting, and then they continued to talk … in our language, Friulian, and they knew it very well because we all lived here, there were no demarcations as regards culture, languages, and it was wonderful to hear them (Gorizia, middle-aged couple).

B: I know Goritian, I know a little of Slovene, not so good, I know also some Friulian, don’t I? And no other languages, but my father attended only the second year of Primary School, at that time there weren’t so many schools as there are now, he died in 1955, but he attended the second year of Primary School; but he knew three languages, four languages, with Friulian: German, Italian, Slovenian, and Friulian, and that’s all.

I: Even German?

B: Also German, we were under Austria, weren’t we?

I: Of course, so they had to … they had to learn it, or they knew it.

B: All of them knew it: my mother and my father … all of them knew four languages, because now also Friulian is a language, isn’t it? So they knew four languages, and then, under Italy: ‘here you have to speak only Italian’, you couldn’t speak any other language (Gorizia, old-generation female).
My father could speak Hungarian and also my mother. They had to learn Hungarian at school. We couldn’t speak Hungarian, but all of them could speak German here (Moschendorf, old-generation male).

Those projections seem to show that in a mythic primordial time the languages of the two communities had an equal status, and that only later, after the well-known political and historical events, was one of them stigmatised and tabooed.

But the linguistic reality of the Austro-Hungarian Empire does not legitimize the myth. In fact, people belonging to the old generation say that their parents and relatives didn’t ‘speak all the languages’; they only knew some frequent and habitual turns of phrase, formulaic expressions, and at times some word-lists for specific (e.g. agricultural or bureaucratic) purposes, which they used in their commercial exchanges, or the few fragments of official language they learnt at school.

The description of mythical periods, when the external political and historical conditions automatically allowed reciprocal knowledge and relationships, thanks to the knowledge of more than one language (and in that environment they were considered as a ‘part of the DNA’ of each individual), should be read as a sort of strategy for justifying the present ‘ignorance’. The new ecosystem, the historical and environmental factors created during recent times, have destroyed the fundamental conditions which allowed reciprocal knowledge. In this way individual responsibility is cancelled and transferred to ‘external situations which I can’t control’.

A further interesting feature of our data has to do with projections and assertions which are made by both groups in reciprocal fashion. For instance, in the Polish community of Zgorzelec knowledge of the German language is considered useful for reasons already discussed. Nevertheless, some of the interviewees say that they don’t know German, adding that they are able to understand it, but aren’t able to learn it. Here is a fragment of dialogue between a middle-generation couple:

TJ: We’ve got used to the language. It’s been so many years.
BJ: Yes, we’ve got used to it and we regret we can’t learn it well. We understand a lot but we can’t learn it.

Along with others in similar situations in other border communities, they affirm that they ‘just didn’t learn it’ and that ‘this was the mistake of our time, they taught us little’.

This is in some sense in contrast with the assessments of German people in Görlitz, who generalise a good command of German to every Pole:

I find it always incredibly impressive how the Poles speak German and how lazy we are ... they speak to you immediately in German (Birgit Wagner, aged 43).

Those Polish colleagues, they spoke a German as good as/almost as good as ours. They thought it was important (Doris Wagner, aged 61).

The older generations were forced to learn Russian, and this was for them a hindrance; they say that for this reason they couldn’t learn German; they are sure that the new generations are luckier because they have the opportunity to learn the latter language:

German no. Children speak it. ... After all we only had Russian. Only Russian. We had just a bit of German. The youth is better off because they speak English and German and they communicate more but of us, older people, is more difficult.
The younger generations are more interested in more ‘spendable languages’, like for example English or French, even if they see German as useful to find, for example, a husband!

If I spoke German fluently I could have a German boyfriend or even a husband (Emilia Jesion, third generation).

Some German people, the young generations say, are trying to learn Polish, but they represent an isolated example (see below).

The data regarding the Czech community in Vejprty show two interesting phenomena. The first of these is indifference towards knowing and learning German:

She was a teacher of German ... she asked the children well what did we do last they said in Czech not even in German (nemcinu) (I am not interested in German).

Well, either German or English is important ... I would say there is no big interest.

People are not interested.

This indifference is in some way denied by the fact that a lot of people claim to know or at least understand it:

I can understand German, I say, I would be able to understand it if I were forced, but I am ashamed that I will say it wrong, but as we went to the East Germany we went to buy clothes for children and so on ... so I went only alone, I say nobody will listen to me, I can understand, I will buy what I need, but with the grandmother here a little always half in Czech half in German.

I'm ashamed to speak, I do understand a lot, I speak German but not much.

The second phenomenon is the perception that Czech is less prestigious than German. For example, they say that on the other side of the border (in Germany) Czech-speaking people are marginalised:

When you come to Germany and you - you start to speak Czech perhaps to your wife so they gape like fools ... when they listen to you like [as if you were] some German I mean ... they gaze at you immediately in an amazed way, as if you were from the universe [another world].

I try to speak German than Czech because a Czech comes in when I go and buy to the shop and I speak German it doesn't matter whether with an accent or not so they don't take notice of me, but when I start speaking Czech, so the shop assistant will be around me all the time.

But they are marginalised even in the Czech territory: German-speaking people (and German-speaking seems to mean, in this case, being German) have a lot of money, so in the shops they are more welcome than Czechs!

It's said that everything is cheap on their side. OK, but when you come to them so you speak Czech so they don't want to speak to you, they go away ... if you speak German so they would do anything ... when Germans come so they say KOMM KOMM KOMM KAUFEN, and like this they are annoying.

They don't want them (the Vietnamese) so they came to us and of course we accepted them and the Germans go for shopping to them because they are not allowed to sell in their country so they sell it at the border and they cross the border and they buy it from them ... they (the Vietnamese) don't want us because I went there and they want only German marks payment only in German marks and for example if you speak Czech they turn away, they say Czechs have not got money, and we don't want to go away, this happened to me personally, I was in Vejprty well, and if I spoke German they would have been very interested in me, as I spoke Czech no interest could be observed so I bought it and the atmosphere was strange the Czechs, the Germans are treated differently.
In this sense language is a strong mark of outgrouping.

The Slovenian-speaking community of Nova Gorica does not seem to stress the language problem, even if almost all of the interviewees say that they know Italian, confirming in this way the assessments made by the Italians. Slovene-speakers from Gorica (i.e. the Italian city of Gorizia) insist instead on strongly marking the problem: they affirm their right to speak their language in their city, where the Slovene minority is able to demonstrate its century-long uninterrupted autochthonous ethnicity. Actually the fact of being a minority (and history legitimates this, see Carli et al. 2002) creates some fears: one’s own language doesn’t have the status of official language, and this results, on the one hand, in a lack of public and institutional occasions to use it and, on the other hand, in the progressive and obvious penetration of the one and only official language (i.e. Italian) into the minority language. Italian as the official language also conveys strong ideological and cultural models, especially through the TV and mass media. Because of these fears, the minority tends to defend everything that is theirs and ‘peculiar’ to them. This behaviour is perceived by the majority group as ‘stupid and pointless obstinacy’.

The Slovenian-speaking community in Eisenkappel/Železna Kapla obviously know German, the language of the dominant group. In Jezersko many people speak German, and most have at least some sort of receptive linguistic knowledge. At the time of the Austrian empire German was imposed by the political regime, and at present it is taught at school; nowadays English is gradually replacing German as the first foreign language. As regards projections about the ‘Others’, the Slovenians in Jezersko say that they are amazed when they can speak Slovenian in the shops on the Austrian side. Actually Slovenian could potentially enjoy many protective measures nowadays in the Carinthian territory, but many rights are still only theoretical rights, because the legitimacy of the Slovene minority in Carinthia is still under discussion.

**Experiencing in- or out-groupness through language**

We would now like to analyse some examples of the sense of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ by means of several emotionally-charged episodes reported by our interviewees and related in some way to acts of speech. Our prototypical example is an episode reported by a Hungarian interviewee (Róbert Bögö, middle generation): below he speaks of how painful it feels not to be able to communicate, in spite of his desire to do so. He comes from the little village of Pinkamindszent, and tells of an encounter with an elderly couple from Moschendorf when the border re-opened for the first time.

… and at a house, back from the church, there were chairs and tables outside the house and an elderly couple. And they [he and his wife] offered us wine. And they wanted to talk in Hungarian, but they couldn’t, and I also wanted to talk to them, but I couldn’t make myself understood. But it was all right, I accepted two glasses of wine, and we were sitting and looking at each other. They couldn’t speak a word of Hungarian, I couldn’t speak a word of German. And this was the most painful thing.

The man was so happy after the extraordinary event of the border re-opening that he imagined he would be able to communicate with people in the village on the other side. Neither of them knew the language of the ‘Other’. But the couple from Moschendorf invited their guest to sit at their table, and they offered him wine: this is of course a symbolic act of free access into the group. But
non-verbal communication alone\textsuperscript{13} eventually did not seem to be enough: the initial happiness was replaced by embarrassed boredom; a ‘two-glasses-of-wine-long’ painful experience created by the impossibility of verbal communication.

This episode shows how the outgroup experience is lived by people with different languages or simply a different variety of the same language. The German-speaking community located on the western side of the former German–German border expresses harsh judgements about ‘the Other over there’, identified with the language spoken, in this instance a stigmatised variety of the ‘proper’ mother tongue. Saxon is in fact the variety which represents and identifies the Ossies (people from the East); it is immediately identifiable and it represents a totally negative label: the ugliness, roughness and vulgarity of the language are seen as the mirror of the primitive roughness and vulgarity of the people.

In the same way, when the ‘Other’ speaks a different mother tongue it is perceived in an antagonistic way; it is never seen as the ‘language of the mother’ or ‘language of the heart’. We have already seen that this fact does not necessarily mean that it has only negative connotations (difficult, incomprehensible, inexpressive): if the language of the outgroup is a western one people are interested in it because it is useful.

In the case of an interviewee from Zgorzelec, Eros (as a feeling or emotion of attraction towards the ‘Other’) enters the scene. The girl lets on that she would like to marry a German boy, if only she knew the language. This suggests the presence of positive emotional tension, as evidenced by mixed marriages as well (in Bärenstein, Vejprty, Eisenkappel/Železna Kapla, Jezersko, Gorizia/Gorica). These emotions may reflect a yearning towards ‘being through the “Other”’, involving highly constructive processes which people may be actually unaware of: ‘\textit{Le cœur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît pas}’.

Positive emotions also come into play when the ultimate goal is entertainment. In one interview, once again in Zgorzelec, the informant, a middle-generation woman, says:

BJ: I mean we have channel one two Polsat and Germany I like the cooking they have these kitchen, cooking because one doesn’t understand but they have good entertainment programmes. Beautiful festivals.
I: And do you watch?
BJ: When you switch and it’s nice, you watch.
I: So this German television.
BJ: We have, but we don’t speak the language. One guesses more.
I: So there is a language barrier.
BJ: There is. We could learn but we didn’t care.
I: Really?
BJ: I mean, learn at school learn, they if they go they can communicate nicely at least. We can’t.

The informant watches German TV even if she doesn’t understand a word, but she is fascinated by ‘the whiff of the world that counts’ (cooking, entertainment, festivals). She regrets that she cannot speak German, so she tries to guess at the words.

One more informant in Zgorzelec, Władysława Furman, female, again second generation, regrets that she cannot speak German:

WF: […] I don’t speak German […]
I: You don’t?
WF: German, no. Children speak it, this was the mistake of our time, they taught us little.
I: Taught little?
WF: Mmm.
I: And you think that if there had been more, there wouldn’t be this barrier.
WF: After all we only had Russian. Only Russian. We had just a bit of German. The youth is better off because they speak English and German and they communicate more but for us, older people it’s more difficult.
I: More difficult?
WF: More difficult, because not speaking the language, even if you are in a shop, I go from the shop the children tell me what is what. I a bit, one remembers a few words from school, but very few. But the children more. And this is the way it should be in my opinion. There is opportunity to go to high school in Goerlitz.

By not admitting that she cannot speak German, she realises that she could have tagged herself as ‘ignorant’ – revealing a little too much of herself – and she immediately proffers indirect excuses, claiming that she was compelled to learn Russian. Nonetheless she declares that she has great faith in the present and the future: the youth is already now better off because they have the opportunity to learn English first and then German.

Entertainment is also as the base of the positive orientation towards the ‘Other’s’ culture in the new generations of Gorizia (Italy) as evidenced by their comments regarding the ‘marvellous’ leisure time activities offered in Nova Gorica (Slovenia). In this case the outgroup represents Eastern language and culture and the ‘Other’s’ environment is conceived of in terms of enjoyable consumption of goods.

In conclusion, let us note the comment of an informant (female, third generation) in Zgorzelec:

Germans begin to learn Polish, so even when they go to a shop they ask me how to say that they want two beers, for example. This is more important for them, why? I have no idea … they simply learn all languages.

The motivation she provides for the German’s ‘thirst for knowledge’ seems a bit naive; her observation reflects the well-known phenomenon of ‘ethnic stylisation’, adopted when a speaker of a more prestigious language feigns curiosity about a less prestigious language. This can be interpreted as a covert (although perhaps unconscious) form of colonisation.

The overview of the mental and emotional landscapes of our informants, along with their perceptions and expectations, tends to develop in two directions. The first, which is less frequent, is represented by those who realise that the ‘Other’ is actually part of ‘Us’. The second, which is much more surreal, identifies the ‘Other’ as the antagonist who interferes with our realisation of our own coherent view of ‘Ourselves’. The same surreal concept emerges in purely linguistic issues: variety (of idioms, registers, styles) is one of the most salient characteristics of every linguistic repertoire, whether we are speaking of a community or a single individual. Thus multilingualism is the norm, certainly not the exception. Each individual (and thereby every community) finds himself or herself at the point of intersection of different traditions, and establishes situation-dependent hierarchies among the languages s/he uses, setting some aside for domestic use and preferring others in more formal occasions. It is evident that sociolinguistic complexity – which strikes us whenever we manage to go beyond the artificial conformity of ‘standardised’ or ‘national’ languages – is not easily reconciled (or rather, cannot be reconciled) with monolithic ethnic identifications.
Conclusions

On the basis of the data gathered during our research it has become evident that contemporary globalisation trends exercise pressure on monolingual identity construction in many ways. The ‘one nation, one language’ ideology is still widespread in the ‘common people’ of Europe (both on the Western and Eastern sides). This has probably been generated by a varied succession of nationalistic impulses beginning in the 1800s. While it is true that many European countries have instituted linguistic policies over recent years which are intended to recognise, promote and institutionalise linguistic diversity, very little of all this is reflected in the vision of the ‘common man’, who, as shown by our survey, still tends to have a monolithic vision of language as a differentiator of identity and culture (Skuttnab-Kangas 2000).

An exception to this widespread ideology is found in minority language groups which exhibit some form of bilingualism. Moreover, the generalised English learning needs in West and East reinforce a monolingual view of modernisation and internalisation (Hornberger 2002).

Far more problematic is the fact that minority languages and local varieties are ‘endangered languages’. The ‘ecology of language metaphor’ could be interpreted as a counter against language endangerment. It implies a multilingual language policy, which is able to promote plurilingualism and to build on language evolution and language environment in order to create inter- and intra-linguistic diversity. According to Hornberger (2002: 35–6), the ‘ecology of language metaphor’ captures a set of ideological underpinnings for a multilingual language policy, in which languages are understood to:

- live and evolve in an ecosystem along with other languages (‘language evolution’);
- interact with their socio-political, economic and cultural environments (‘language environment’); and
- become endangered if there is inadequate environmental support for them vis-à-vis other languages in the ecosystem (‘language endangerment’).

Europe is a multilingual continent in which the tension between linguistic pluralism and assimilation is quite evident at present. In recent times, phenomena of localisation and schizmogenesis have been seen as a response to globalisation.

In areas where nationalistic impulses have long contributed to the absence of specific multilingual linguistic policies, minority groups and border communities appear to suffer the most serious consequences. Phenomena of linguistic erosion are present for the former, while closure and schizmogenetic counter-phenomena are evident in the latter. The formation of a Europe based on regions – rather than on nations – has brought language policy and planning to the attention of policy-makers, linguists and language educators. Such policies, which have already shown their effectiveness in the case of ‘Community Languages’ (Hornberger 1996; Horvath and Vaughan 1991; Nettle and Romaine 2000), pursue any form of reciprocal bilingual biliteracy for the communities present in the same region.

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**Notes**

1. A special case is represented by the two communities on either side of the former East–West German border where the social evaluation regards regional varieties (i.e. Saxo-Thuringian and Franco-Bavarian dialects) of the same ‘national’ language (German). Also the case of Bärenstein should be kept in mind because it has never been on the ‘Iron Curtain’ since it belonged to the territory of the former GDR; nevertheless German is considered one of the prestigious West European languages.

2. According to Ammon (1991), a language may be strictly termed international if different ‘nations’ with different languages use the same language in addition to their own; Ammon defines this use as ‘international-interlingual’ communication (international *stricto sensu*); if on the other hand different ‘nations’ share the same language, the use is defined as ‘international-intralingual’ (international *lato sensu*). This is the case of German, officially used in different ‘nations’/countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Liechtenstein) unified by the same language.

3. Our conceptual framework for analysing linguistic power includes three different types of power: an intrinsic power (or being-power, what a linguistic community *is*); an extrinsic power (or having-power, what a linguistic community *has*); and a structural-functional power (or position-power, what a linguistic community ‘does’ or ‘is considered to be able to do’). For more detail see Phillipson (1992).

4. Polish, Czech, Hungarian and Slovenian. In genetic-typological terms, three of them belong to the Slavic branch (Polish, Czech, Slovenian), whereas Hungarian is a Finno-Ugric language. Typologically, the two Western languages (German and Italian) belong to two distinct branches: German is a Germanic and Italian a Romance language. On the other hand, from a typological point of view most of the languages considered in our research belong to the larger Indo-European family (two on the western, and three on the eastern side), only one to the Finno-Ugric (on the eastern side).

5. According to Baker and Jones (1998) we differentiate ‘individual bilingualism’ – which is more or less a private phenomenon – from ‘social/societal bilingualism’, which is directly or indirectly interwoven with the politics of a nation-state. In this latter case we deal with the effective situation in relationship to power structures and political systems.

6. According to Fishman (1969: 113) ‘nationism – as distinguished from nationalism – is primarily concerned not with ethnic authenticity but with operational efficiency’.

7. We distinguish the so-called ‘natural’ bilingualism, acquired through early, prolonged and continuous enculturation processes, from ‘guided or structured’ second-language acquisition.

8. We refer to the Thuringian/Saxon (East) and Upper Franconian (West) diatopic varieties of the same language; in fact, standard German ‘covers’ the range of the ‘formal-official’ communication (public-institutional language domains) for both communities, meanwhile local varieties are very divergent and commonly used for everyday communication in domestic-informal settings. It must be said that the social evaluation of a language affects not only the ‘national languages’ but also the diatopic and diastratic varieties of that same language. In this specific German case, stigma affects the eastern variety, as we will see presently.

9. From a Mussolini speech held in Trieste in 1939, ‘It is absolutely necessary to establish a clear racial awareness through mother-tongue in order to evince not only differences but also very distinct superiorities’. See Carli *et al.* (2002).

10. In Gorizia there is only one Slovenian-speaking minority, but the Italian speakers – in situations of a low-guarded speech – talk about ‘minorities’. The use of plural instead of the singular, or the use of the abstract instead of the actual, is one of the strategies used to minimise reality.

11. After the Second World War the German-speaking minority in Czechoslovakia was the object of a repressive policy which did not allow children to attend schools and to speak German at all in public domains.

12. One of the most central labels in the colonialist cultural mythology is the ‘dialect’. It expresses the way the dominant group differentiates itself from and stigmatises the dominated group. It therefore forms part of an essentially racist ideology. The rule is that *we* are a nation with a language whereas *they* are a tribe with a dialect.
We refer to paralinguistic, i.e. prosodic features and kinesics like the so-called ‘body language’, including gestures, facial expressions and posture together with a hyper-articulated phonetic articulation in a high tone of voice.

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