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Alyssa Ayres

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Introduction

What is a nation? We are no closer to a parsimonious answer than was Ernest Renan in 1882 – but the nation has not weakened for lack of verbal concision. If anything, its power has grown, measured by the sheer number of nations and national claims that now swell our world.

One might expect the nation's hold to wane in our changed global landscape, one characterized by rapid increases in the circulation of people, images, and information across national boundaries. For even if we do not know quite what a nation *is*, we do know what it *does*: the nation, after all, claims and organizes political sovereignty – statehood – over discrete territory. Yet the erosion of sovereignty, the dramatic growth of migration, and the increasing ability of individuals to communicate across wide spaces on a scale never previously experienced has not dampened the appeal of the nation in any measurable way. In spite of globalization – some argue as a result of it – we find that the local impulses inherent to nationalism perdure.

The growth and spread of nationalism, as many scholars have explicated, operates through a political logic of cultural difference, one which at its endpoint posits that different peoples have a right to rule themselves. During the twentieth century, this basic assumption structured the emergence of new nation-states resulting from the decolonization wave, the boundaries of which – often created artificially – contained dizzying cultural diversity. If the successes of nationalism offered a more just world to those who had been imperial subjects, their corollary epistemology would naturalize the idea that nation-states by definition lay claim to a unique and unified culture and history – giving rise to the challenge of integration as a major issue for culturally diverse populations united by citizenship in newly formed states.

But the subsequent decades did not uniformly result in the “integrative revolution” for which many had hoped. By the last two decades of the twentieth century, instances of internal – rather than international – conflict had come to the fore. Moreover, in places where debates about national culture had long been settled, new migrations and circulations

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of ideas are reopening these very issues. In the United States, a renewed argument about immigration focuses on the southern border. In this latest version of an old American debate, the perceived unwillingness of Spanish speakers to “learn English” and assimilate into the Anglo-Protestant national culture is, in some tellings, the new threat to national unity.¹ In Germany, Turkish immigrants – many of whom are German citizens – are perceived to threaten German national culture due to religion (Islam) and insufficient assimilation of German culture. In the UK, it is Urdu, Bengali, or Punjabi-speaking immigrants who occupy this role. Migrations are not the sole catalyst for the resurgence of these debates: continued demands from autochthonous language communities in places such as Peru (Quechua), Spain (Basque, Catalan, Galicia), France (Alsatian, Languedoc, the languages of Oc), and Belgium (where the French–Flemish divide has recently intensified) also signal some ruptures at the edges of the culture–nation link.

Changed political boundaries and the emergence of new countries during the 1990s spurred widespread language and cultural policy changes in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the federation known as Yugoslavia seemed to confirm, in the fervor with which the new states implemented language laws to assert the historical continuity of their country’s existence, that cultural difference ultimately cannot be contained within the political boundaries of the nation-state. As if to underscore this new conclusion, the Serbo-Croatian language – like the former constituent states of Yugoslavia – split apart, the hyphen no longer politically or culturally useful.

Each of these contexts serves to illustrate how language retains a strong hold as an emblem of national life and, more to the point, how changing ideas about the nation seem to require language change. Probing these two conclusions further, however, reveals a logical paradox. By any measure, and in any historical account, territories claimed as constitutive homes of today’s national languages are the result of state practices: language laws, state education institutions, and media campaigns. Again using Western European examples – for it is Western Europe that has served as the assumed standard for much of social theorizing – a great deal of work was required to make Frenchmen of France’s peasants, or to institutionalize what we know as Italian even in the territories we have long known as Italy. Eugene Weber’s carefully documented history, for example, notes that French was a “foreign language” for half of France’s citizens well into the early twentieth century; at its moment of

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

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nationhood, Italian was spoken by 2.5 percent of the population.² Against history, the assumption that political formations should be (and are) culturally homogenous becomes a more difficult proposition to maintain, yet it is the foundation stone of nationalist discourse. Seen from this perspective, this newest phase of public discussion serves to reopen perhaps the oldest and most contentious debate of the modern world of nation-states: the cultural basis of national identity. And as we know from even recent history, this is the stuff of both patriotism and violence alike.

Language plays a central role in creating boundaries of belonging that shape, or rather are shaped by, choices of national identity. Despite the fact that language is a very pliant facet of one's social self, widespread and indeed formalized linkage of language with ethnicity has created our current world of nation-states. Earlier forms of political organization, such as empire, were able to contain linguistic and cultural diversity without fearing that the "center" would not hold. But in a world propelled by nationalism, the cultural distinctiveness of the nation proves its right to existence. The shift is not without consequences.

At its broadest, this book explores the contradictory roles that language plays in the creation of national identity in modernity. Throughout the world, debates about national identity inevitably revolve around the politics of culture, in which language serves as a cause, a solution, a muse for the national self, and a technology of the state. Each of these roles underscores the complicated work, and the myriad assumptions, expected of and loaded onto language. Yet all too often the historical process through which languages emerge with "national" status are effaced. Admitting the modern nature of this fundamental building block of national existence would undermine claims to antiquity, for nation-states lay claim to a foundational national culture that somehow, and invariably, should be seen as age-old, unique on earth, imbued with a particular spirit, and heir to a special history – often in sharp contrast to the more discursive understandings offered by academic historians.³

This book investigates the language–culture–nation linkage through a paradigmatic and important case, Pakistan. Pakistan's internal faultlines have been the subject of recent international attention, most particularly the growth of radical Islamic extremism and its threat to Pakistani civic life. The dominance of Pakistan's military and the country's struggle

² Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 70. On Italian: Tullio de Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita* (Bari: Laterza, 1963), 41, cited in E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992 [1990]), 38.

³ See Ronald Grigor Suny, "Constructing Primordialisms: Old Histories for New Nations," *Journal of Modern History* 73 (December 2001).

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to regain civilian authority marks the other major international concern. This book focuses on the question of Pakistan's cultural identity, emblemized through language, which remains a source of conflict and internal competition. As such, this work contributes to the growing body of historiography on nationalism and the nation, a great part of which has centered on the experiences of Western Europe, with cases from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union a more recent addition. Drawing upon Pakistan's cultural history – with comparative reference to India and Indonesia – the study investigates how these three major post-colonial states conceptualized, defined, and legislated their national cultures. These three largest states to emerge from colonial rule, accounting for some one-quarter of humanity, pursued very different policies in the pursuit of national identity formation. The outcomes of those different decisions offer lessons about how ideologies of language impact public policy, and how policies of culture-making impact public life. The global growth in civil, rather than international, conflicts at the end of the twentieth century offers many examples of conflicts over culture; one of the goals of the research undertaken here was to offer a detailed narrative exploring why certain language policy choices in Asia resulted in such different outcomes, perhaps providing lessons for the future. In this sense, this work marks an effort to engage in historiographical scholarship that can have relevance to public policy decisions.

The puzzling history of language and nationalism in Pakistan forms the center of the inquiry. The first modern nation-state conceived and founded on the basis of religion – preceding Israel by a year – Pakistan was created from Muslim-majority territories partitioned out of India by the departing British in 1947. Overnight, Pakistan became the largest Muslim country in the world. Yet despite the Pakistan Movement's arguments that South Asian Muslims formed a coherent and unique civilization, a nation deserving its own territory, conflict began nearly immediately and centered on demands for cultural/linguistic pluralism. These demands, later reinforced by problems of economic and political power-sharing, formed a central complaint of Pakistan's Bengali-speaking East Wing, which in 1971 seceded from Pakistan to form Bangladesh. It was another first: in this case, the first successful secession from a postcolonial state. The country created, in the words of vanguard Muslim nationalist Mohammad Iqbal, as a homeland for “Muslim society, with its remarkable homogeneity and inner unity,”⁴

⁴ Speech given at the 1930 All-India Muslim League meeting. Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, ed., *Foundations of Pakistan: All-India Muslim League Documents: 1906–1947*, vol. II, 1924–1947 (Karachi: Ferozsons, 1970), 154.

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split apart not twenty-four years later – as if disproving the earlier argument of civilizational coherence.

The cultural-linguistic challenges within the remaining Pakistan, reduced by half, continued. In the province of Sindh, of course, language conflict has remained unresolved since 1947, becoming bloodier during the 1990s. The Northwest Frontier Province, amidst its other troubles linked to the terrible conflict in Afghanistan, has repeatedly sought greater linguistic recognition and cultural autonomy for its Pashtun population. These linguistic demands have presented themselves in opposition to the dominant Punjabi majority in the country. Yet from the 1980s forward, gaining momentum particularly in the early part of the twenty-first century, a language movement within central Punjab – one quite distinct from the Siraki language movement of southern Punjab – has similarly begun to argue for official recognition of the Punjabi language and its cultural and literary history. The emergence of this movement from within the putative ethnic hegemon of the country raises additional questions about the theoretical relationship of language and nationalism, not the least of which lies in the strange paradox of a regional cultural, economic and political power harboring apparently unsatisfied cultural entrepreneurs within. Reframed in the language of cultural history, the case of Pakistan readily reveals the disjuncture between the nation-form and its demands for a unified cultural past and present, against the lived reality of a people yet “unproduced” through the nation.

Pakistan’s experience with the Urdu language is a good place to examine how polity and the nation are structured through national culture. This first nation-state founded on the basis of religion, at the cost of more than a million lives and the displacement of between twelve and eighteen million people, has offered its citizens rather less than a secure and prosperous homeland for all. Language conflict has resulted in dissent, secession, and in the case of East Bengal/Bangladesh, genocide – underscoring the gnawing question posed by Ayesha Jalal in 1985: how did a Pakistan come about which fit the interests of most Muslims so poorly?⁵

Despite decades of language, education, and media policies designed to produce the people as Pakistani, one important recurring theme of virtually all analyses of the country is the question of subnational or regional identity movements. (As if to reiterate this point, a recent volume on Pakistan bears the subtitle “*Nationalism Without a Nation?*”)⁶

⁵ Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4.

⁶ Christophe Jaffrelot, ed., *Pakistan: Nationalism without a Nation?* (New Delhi; London, and New York: Manohar Publishers and Zed Books Ltd., 2002).

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These analyses have long concerned themselves with “centrifugal” forces, a metaphor that, by suggesting a spinning outwards, reifies the notion of a totalizing national consciousness as necessary for the nation-state. In a state for which the battle for consciousness has always been between the “provinces” versus the “center,” the question of course arises as to where national consciousness can be located. For decades the answer has been Punjab. Yet the above-mentioned linguistic and cultural revivalism gaining ground within Punjab, the Punjabinism movement, suggests a sort of insufficiency of the bid to forge a nation per the demands of the form, with a coherent national language, culture, and history. In other words, there appear to be limitations of the national imagination, and those limitations are articulated in terms of language and identity – the building blocks of linguistic revivals, but now percolating throughout the center as well as the provinces.

In exploring these questions, this book tells two stories. The first is about the politics of making a nation against a backdrop in which that nation has been assumed to exist already. Pakistan’s story is emblematic, and provides a vantage point from which to understand the central role that the creation of a “national culture” plays, and how language is central to that creation. This story is driven by a desire to think about why language has been such a contested site of conflict in Pakistan’s history – for there is no question that it has – but has remained a less than central focus in academic analyses of Pakistan, occupying a mere footnote to ideas about ethnic identity which assume innate and fixed boundaries of ethnicity. This book explores the ways in which the state project to forge a Pakistani ethnicity through the cultural heritage of the Urdu language created antipathies where it sought unity.

The second story, which emerges from the first, takes the case of Pakistan as a point of departure to think more carefully about what role language plays in nationalism, in creating a sense of national belonging – indeed, in the articulation of the nation in the most literal of all senses. Our most powerful theories of nationalism rest on an assumption of language’s centrality to communicative practices that form consciousness. I will question that assumption, suggesting that in fact the evidence here suggests that the idea of the national language flows from an idea of national consciousness rather than the reverse. That being the case, we can also investigate aspects of why certain national language projects have been more successful than others, and how language ideology – an important concept in linguistic anthropology – plays a powerful role in that determination, one underexplored in comparison with its political impact. I share James Scott’s assessment that the high-modernist impulses of the twentieth century – the imperative to shape, mold, and

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“improve the human condition” by changing what existed naturally – produced state practices of simplification, which in many cases resulted in catastrophic outcomes.⁷ Yet a comparative assessment of language policy in India, Indonesia, and Pakistan reveals some surprising lessons about how and when state simplifications, at least of language, can actually work. Only through probing comparatively can we identify the relevant lessons from history that may help shape a better future.

The nation, nationalism, and language

Perhaps no tension in the articulation of the nation is greater than this paradox: the widespread idea of language as some kind of proxy for particular racial and/or national belonging, in stark contrast – as much of this book explores – with complicated histories of language standardization and propagation required to “produce the people” in various nation-states. Benedict Anderson has remarked on this paradox with respect to the “Russifying policy orientation” of official nationalism in the Soviet Union, by which he meant the domination of Russia as the normative cultural basis for the Soviet Union.⁸ The cultural logic of the nation, as has been shown by numerous historians, collapses polity into a form of sovereignty requiring an authorized culture.⁹ As Ronald Grigor Suny has observed, “In the discourse of the nation, culture is the source of political power. The right to rule belongs to the people/nation that is imagined as coherent, bounded, and conscious of its position as the foundation of the state’s legitimacy.”¹⁰ But legitimacy, and that authorized culture of the nation, is something which must be produced. Language occupies a central role in this discourse, though one not always foregrounded.

Scholars point to German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) as the intellectual inspiration for the notion that language

⁷ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, New York: Verso, 1991), 113.

⁹ Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Balibar and Wallerstein (London and New York: Verso, 1991 [1988]); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. Forgas and Nowell-Smith, trans. Boelhower (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); E. J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For a comparison of the vernacular millennium in South Asia with that of Western Europe, see Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Suny, “Constructing Primordialisms,” 881.

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and nationality, or language and race, are mutually bound like a sort of double-helix.¹¹ For Herder, “national genius” was located in poetry, literature, and folk songs – the products of the people, but not understood as produced *by* people as we today understand the contingent and constructed nature of identity. Rather, for Herder, the environment itself had agency instead of the people; he located “national genius” in the actual territorial soil, believing that “Climates and Nations are universally marked in it [national mythologies].”¹² Herder’s sense of the bounded limits on national culture, derived from the particularities of the environment, was coupled with his idea that “all these tribes of men ... have not invented, but *inherited*” their own mythology.¹³ This concept is an important one, implying an unchanging and autarkic sense of nation in which the work of cultural production and reproduction takes place independent of the people imbued within it. We can see as well Herder’s emphasis on the pure spirit of oral traditions as somehow “truer” to the ground, an unpolluted manifestation of national culture.

More than two centuries later, we find such ideas expressed in this way wildly naïve, even absurd; two generations of critical scholarship have rejected pure notions of a “culture concept” as a discrete, bounded entity. “Herderian” as an adjective implies today – at least in the academic world – a theoretically uninformed position unable to recognize the idea of national identity as an artifact of social construction, or indeed misrecognizing the internal variances and power relations within cultures for some coherent whole. While the careful work of scholars from several disciplines has illuminated the ways people both in contemporary and historic contexts have long practiced human sociality through multiple languages – notable cases being the Columbian Vaupes Indians, navigating some three to ten languages as part of everyday life, or closer to the study here, South Asia as a “linguistic region”¹⁴ – the rigidity with which Herderian assumptions of language and nation have been bound has remained unyielding at the popular level, seem-

¹¹ Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, “Language Philosophy as Language Ideology: John Locke and Johann Gottfried Herder,” in *Regimes of Language*, ed. Paul Kroskrity (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 2000). On language and the environment, see Johann Gottfried Herder, “National Genius and the Environment,” in *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968 [1784]).

¹² Herder, “National Genius,” 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴ Jean Jackson, “Language Identity of the Colombia Vaupes Indians,” in *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, eds. Bauman and Sherzer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974). Charles A. Ferguson, “South Asia as a Sociolinguistic Area,” in *Dimensions of Sociolinguistics in South Asia*, eds. Dimock, Kachru, and Krishnamurti (New Delhi, Bombay, and Calcutta: Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., 1992).

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ingly globally. This affects public discourse, public policy, and of course public self-presentations as a result.

For our purposes, the nature in which nationalists as well as many theorists of nationalism have assumed this Herderian trope has served to foreclose the possibility of imagining the nation as a multilingual socio-political unit. If indeed the nation as a form and the idea of nationalism spread modularly, from Western Europe throughout the world (again following Anderson), the unproblematized corollary of such dissemination would be the modular spread of the idea that the nation must be monolingual – even, and notably, in the postcolonial states for which linguistic uniformity had never been a feature. Etienne Balibar, in “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” gestures toward the necessary, in fact *required*, role of language in effecting the production of what he terms “fictive ethnic identity” indispensable to the production of patriotism, a fictive ethnicity drawing upon a teleological narrative of the past which serves to render the present nation form as natural.¹⁵ Though Balibar sees language as necessary but not sufficient to produce ethnicity, precisely because of its “paradoxical properties” of “plasticity” – by which he means that humans have the ability to acquire new languages – at the same time, he underscores that:

not only that the national language should be recognized as the official language, but, much more fundamentally, that it should be able to appear as the very element of the life of a people.¹⁶

Hence the “national language” in the world of nation-states – the twentieth century marked the rise of a new idea that political formations necessarily have a language, and without one, the claim to nationhood would always remain incomplete. To press further on the language–polity linkage, this book places language, the national language, as the central subject of inquiry. It is no longer sufficient given what we know about the complicated processes of nation-formation to ignore or treat as epiphenomenal the work of language in that process of articulation. A central argument this book makes is that the production of the national language, like national history, is itself recursively imbricated in that which it is expected to evidence, namely, *nationality*.

But language is not simply a sort of template or filter one can apply or remove with equal malleability. Were that the case, language revivals themselves theoretically should not exist, for in the aftermath of large-scale state instituted language propagation, cultural “memory”

¹⁵ Balibar, “The Nation-Form,” 96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

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of languages without state patronage would be expected to disappear. As we know, however, human behavior does not work this way. Equally true is that while the human capacity to learn languages is theoretically infinite – thus rendering narrow ideas about nation qua language, à la Herder, mechanically not to mention historically inaccurate – at the same time it is quite clear that language and the politics of its place in modern polities have been central questions for many states, suggesting that some forms of attachment exert very powerful pulls. Social science has tended to treat such attachments as non-rational or, worse still, a mask for other types of more instrumental motivations. Yet the historical narratives in the pages which follow offer evidence that ideas about particular aesthetic spaces can prove to be powerful incentives.

A cursory survey of politics in the late twentieth century reveals a globally widespread phenomenon of new nation-states legitimizing polity through creating new national languages, sometimes quite abruptly. This move operates in the direction of what I will call a “language paradox,” where the national genius of the people is located in a language, and then the state undertakes to develop that language for modern national use. If this sounds circular, it is intentionally so, for nothing is more circular than the logic of creating the very thing posited as that which differentiates it. In the process, this state interventionism participates in processes of ethnogenesis by virtue of the new variable it introduces in concepts of cultural legitimacy. I elaborate on this concept in Chapters 4 and 5 by taking a closer look at cultural legitimacy and symbolic capital, with a particular focus on the case of Punjab.

The salient lesson of this phenomenon lies in the evidencing a modality of attachment to the *idea* of a national language with perhaps greater primacy than the attachment to any language itself, resulting in exercises of “language development” in order to forge a modern form of communication from local oral language forms, or even dormant languages of scripture. The most prominent examples are of course the resuscitation of Hebrew to become the official language of Israel, the “spoken Sanskrit” movement in India, and more recently the many linguistic revivals in the states created by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Bhavna Dave’s work on Kazakhstan and David Laitin’s work, particularly on Estonia, best illustrate this phenomenon as it affected numerous new states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia during the 1990s.¹⁷

¹⁷ Bhavna Dave, “Politics of Language Revival: National Identity and State Building in Kazakhstan” (PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 1996); David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). On spoken Sanskrit, see Adi Hastings, “Signifying Sanskrit in Hindu Revivalist and Nationalist Discourse”