

ROM1(2)B133 Minority Languages in Europe

Synthesizing the variety

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Where is the difference between a minoritized language and the other human natural languages?

From the point of view of general linguistics nowhere.

The **etymology** of the word *minority* shows that not the language but the political life is the original field for the meaning of minority.

Another information that the etymology gave to us is that the word has a literate origin. The word was used to satisfy the expressive needs of the high society and to express its point of view.

Do they have politics and linguistics something in common?

Yes, in Europe since the first steps of linguistics.

The first surveys on language were made in ancient Greece by teachers. Aristocratic pupils needed to learn how to speak in public.

This is the reason why until one century ago the synchronic studies were oriented more toward defining rules and less toward describing the natural use of the language.

Why is politics so interested in linguistics?

The language in first of all a social issue and it is concerned with communication.

Who rules a community must rule the communication, they do it consciously or not.

But the communication in a community is an enormous phenomenon. It is impossible to control it all. What you can do is to rule the part that you define as the important part of the communication and the rest is something *minor*.

Language and society

The spoken language covers a large part of the communication in a community, but it has more social functions.

The language marks very strongly that someone is a member of the community, both for other fellows and for not members. It distinguishes native members from new members. It gives informations about the membership in subcommunities: the population of a specific town, a social rank inside the town, a specific generation, etc..

Language and society

The language is also an encyclopedia of the civilization of a community. The semantics of the lexicon structures the universe in a way that expresses the point of view of the community.

Example. In English grammatical gender is related to real sexual characters of the described element. How is it your feeling about the following text?

I believe in God. She created the universe.

Remember that, in the real world, creation (lat. genesis) is a female activity and it is quite common for languages with grammatical gender to express everything that is able to create something else with a feminine noun.

Language and communities

We saw that language marks the members of a subcommunity. It happens because the subcommunities have a language with its own characters. Naturally it has also its encyclopedia, its point of view.

You understand it fully and you can influence it if you are a member of the language community, generally when you are a member of the subcommunity.

When the rulers are outside of a subcommunity, they have limited skills for its control.

Language and communities

Subcommunities are often subcommunities of more than one community.

It means that the members of two different communities share a special feeling of solidarity that is not common to the rest of the members of both communities. It makes them suspected of disloyalty toward both communities.

Example: the Basque nation living in both France and Spain.

Language and communities

It happens that a subcommunity in a state is the same of the rulers of another community. Then the suspicion is very strong.

Example: German speaking population of France in the age of the World Wars.

This case is very common in the world since the first historical times and it is the most considered in official culture.

Language and nation

The rulers of a community constitute a subcommunity. Their language is usually considered the national language.

But the *word* nation has no universal meaning and the contemporary concept of nation in the European civilization is just an episode in the long history of the word. In addition, the concept of nation is now in crisis.

Language and nation

Since the Romantic era (1789–1830) the idea of language as a fundamental component of the nation identity spread in Europe, together with the idea that each nation needs its own state in order to fully express itself.

This concept of nation extremely increased the suspicion toward subcommunities with a peculiar language and often led to deny the same existence of a specific subcommunity.

The right to speak your language

After World War II the right to speak the language of your subcommunity is generally recognised.

It is considered your personal right and it induces a problem. Here *my personal right implies your personal obligation*: I can speak a language if you learned it.