On Terminology and Preconceptions

During the past two centuries the concept of “a language” (Einzelsprache) has been a highly politicized category of thinking about politics and societies in Central Europe. Today, the region is divided among nation-states. The founding and existence of practically all these polities has been justified with the ethnolinguistic strain of nationalist ideology. Nationalism proposes that a legitimate state (that is, nation-state) should be for one nation only. Typically, the population in an already extant non-national (pre-national) polity is announced to be a nation, thus making this non-national polity into a nation-state. However, in the case of ethnolinguistic nationalism, the nation is believed to be primary, not the state. The nation precedes its state. But without the prop of a state, another element of the social reality must be employed for defining what the nation is. Since the early nineteenth century the Einzelsprache has been employed in Central Europe in this function.

Einzelsprachen (languages) are actualizations of the human biological capacity for speech, confusingly also known as “language” in English. Hence, to distinguish between this capacity and its actualizations I fall back on the specialist German terminological distinction made between these two, namely Sprache and Einzelsprachen (or Einzelsprache in singular). I keep the article-less English term “language” to refer to the biological capacity for speech, while the un-italicized German term “Einzelsprache” for talking about languages that take the plural form and in singular must be preceded by an article.

The concept of Einzelsprache is not self-explanatory either. It emerged between the second century BCE and second century CE in the Judeo-Graeco-Roman cultural and political milieu of the Middle East and the Balkans. Later, the concept spread across the “tri-continental” Roman Empire and was adopted in the Islamic Caliphate. The emergence of this concept is connected to the invention, and use of, the then novel technology of writing. The material difference between speech and written text was conceptualized as starkly dichotomous. From this point of view, linguistic difference came in two opposed forms, namely, that of languages (Einzelsprachen) endowed with a written form, alongside “dialects” that typically were not recorded in writing.

Fast forward to the present, when literacy is nearly universal across Europe and the West, linguistic difference is expressed in terms of languages (Einzelsprachen). At the same time dialects are seen as belonging to this or that “proper” Einzelsprache. Obviously, this intellectual construct is illogical and anachronistic, because people spoke in “unwritten dialects” for well over 100,000 years before writing was invented in Mesopotamia about five millennia ago. Subsequently, the technology of writing also developed independently in what today is China and Central America. Ergo, as a rule of thumb, any dialect is much older than an Einzelsprache. It was dialects that spawned Einzelsprachen, not the other way round. Dialects refer to speech, which is primary, while its graphic representation (writing), which constitutes the foundation of each Einzelsprache, is secondary.

Hence, the idea of “belonging” that is often deployed for describing the relationship between dialects and “their” Einzelsprache must actually signify something else. It reflects the structure of power relations between human groups that speak such dialects, and that write and speak this Einzelsprache. Humans and their groups create dialects and Einzelsprachen, or actualizations of the biological capacity for speech. Without humans (or other species capable of speech) there could be none of these actualizations. Humans are a social species that naturally live in groups. The human group uses a limited number of markers that allow its members to swiftly recognize one another as members for the sake of building and maintaining group cohesion. Yet, these markers allow the group’s members to spot any “intruding Other,” or a member of a foreign group. In this way the group’s socio-spatial boundary is created, often qualified with the adjective “ethnic.” In both today’s scholarly and popular parlance, ethnic refers to the aforementioned markers and group-building processes. The term ethnic stems from the medieval Greek adjective ἑθνικός for denoting “pagans,” or “confessional Others” in the eyes of Christian Greeks. The word’s nominal form ἑθνος (originally denoting “group of people” or “company”) for “pagans” or “heathens,” later yielded the Greek term for “a people” and today’s Greek word for “nation.”

Before the rise of institutionalized religions and the state as a centralized organization controlling a vast number of people over an extensive territory, the main marker of difference used for building and maintaining human groups was speech, or rather immediately noticeable differences in it, that is, linguistic difference of which, people spoke in “unwritten dialects” as “ethnics” (a Gallicism), or “ethnose” (a Sovietism drawn from the Russian language). In turn,
this internationalism was back-translated into modern Greek as εθνοτική ομάδα ethnotiki omáda.

In the rarely articulated but widespread modern European belief, ethnic groups are characterized by their “unwritten dialects” as opposed to “civilized” nations with their “full-fledged” Einzelsprachen (languages). Likewise, without giving much thought to this fact, in Europe (stateless) ethnic groups are disparaged as “nationalities” or “(ethnic and national) minorities,” while outside Europe (especially in Africa) as “tribes.” In this context, the word dialect often becomes a term of abuse for “proving” that its speakers are “backward” or “stand at a lower rank of (civilizational) development.” At times this disparaging usage is fortified by replacing the word dialect with such terms as “vernacular,” “tongue” or “idiom.” In the same disparaging manner, French speakers use the term patois instead of dialecte, Russian-speakers наречие nareche instead of диалект dialekt, or Polish-speakers gwara instead of dialekt.

This politicized thinking about human groups colored with emotions is further complicated by vastly different meanings denoted with the word for nation in the languages of Western and Central Europe, thus leading to serious misunderstandings. In English or French, “nation” commonly functions as a synonym for “state.” Hence, the academic and juridical neologism “nation-state” tends to sound quite superfluous to the uninitiated English-speaker’s ear and as some kind of confusing “state-state.” This difficulty does not arise, for instance, in German or Polish. In the former language, “state” is Staat and “nation” is Volk (or in some specialized meanings, also Nation), while in the latter, naród and naród, respectively. In normal usage, these terms for nation in German and Polish are not used to mean state. In Polish, the term nation-state is rendered as państwo narodowe and in German as Nationalstaat, so speakers of these languages are not confused by the term, and find it rather meaningful.

A further terminological difficulty arises in the case of the term “nationality” for denoting either the individual’s membership in a nation, or (originating from the legal vocabulary of Austria-Hungary, especially the term Volksstamm) a human group that is more than an ethnic group but less than a nation (some authorities prefer the neologism “proto-nation” in this meaning), entailing that such a group has a right to autonomy, but not to (national) independence. However, in English “nationality” most often functions as the preferred synonym for “citizenship,” unlike in German or Polish. “Nationality” in German is Nationalität and narodowość in Polish, which cannot stand for “citizenship,” or Staatsbürgerschaft (“citizenship”) in German and obywatelstwo in Polish. In Russian the term “nationality,” as opposed to citizenship (гражданство grazhdanstvo in Russian), comes in two different forms, namely, as народность narodnost’ and национальность nationalnost’, the former stemming from the word народ narod (people) and the latter from нация natsiia (nation). In the past both terms (narodnost’ and nationalnost’) were interchangeably employed to mean “proto-nation with a right to autonomy,” while only nationalnost’ to denote “membership in a nation.” Nowadays, it is almost exclusively narodnost’ that is employed to mean proto-nation. Hence, these two distinct meanings of the term nationality are rendered with two different words in contemporary Russian, lessening the possibility of confusion between them.

That is why when English-, German-, Polish- and Russian-speakers happen to meet and start discussing nations and nationality in English, they may mean starkly different things using the very same English terms, thus leading to misunderstandings and confusion. These different meanings are a legacy of diverging historical paths taken when nation-states were built in Western and Central (and Eastern) Europe. As mentioned above, in Western Europe it was the polity that redefined its population as a nation, thus transforming itself into a nation-state (State = Nation). In Central Europe, where for a variety of reasons this possibility was (or was thought to be) unavailable, all the speakers of an Einzelsprache were defined as (a stateless) nation. They in turn had to win a state for themselves and cleanse it of Others, in order to make the freshly established polity into a “pure” (“true”) nation-state in line with the ideological formula of ethnolinguistic nationalism (Language = Nation = State).

At present, the almost foolproof one-to-one correlation between nation-states and Einzelsprachen in Central Europe is mystifying to Western Europeans, and not followed elsewhere in the world, with the exception of post-1945 Southeast and East Asia. It appears that the phenomenon of ethnolinguistic nationalism as a basis for statehood creation and maintenance is fully confined to Eurasia.

Dialect Continua

With so much political capital invested in creating the normative correlation between nation-states and languages in Central Europe, rarely do historians or linguists see Einzelsprachen in Central Europe as products of human ingenuity and decisions, or as actualizations of the very Judeo-Greaco-Roman concept of Einzelsprache that was devised only two millennia ago. The monadic-like equation between the Einzelsprache and the nation in this region of Europe translates into a highly ideologized (“nationalized”), and hence, anachronistic, interpretation of the past that was not national in its character often until the turn of the twentieth century. Despite the fact that nationalism and nations are products of the last two centuries, it is speciously proposed that Central Europe’s nations and (“their”) languages are as old as one or even two millennia. At the same time, radical or dogmatic nationalists claim that national languages are “eternal,” “given” to the nation “by a god,” and that they constitute “the legacy and destiny” of today’s nation-states.

Central Europe’s national master narratives, or the nationalized interpretation of the past, tend to retroactively appropriate attested polities from a millennium or two ago as rightly belonging to this or that modern nation. As a result, the (Eastern) Roman Empire (“Byzantium”) is claimed for the Greek nation, the Turkicphonic Bulgars’ Khanate for the Bulgarian nation, “Great(er) Moravia” (actually the medieval polity’s official name is unknown) for the Slovak nation, the Holy Roman Empire for the German nation, or the Varangian
(Norsemen) Rus’ for the Russian nation. This trick of a historian’s hand works because the nationalized approach to interpreting the past is widely accepted and taught at school. These “nationally credulous” populates (or nations) can then be easily mobilized by a state leader who chooses to refer to a momentous event in “our national past” of a millennium ago.

The continuing success of this national approach to the reinterpretation of the past is fortified by the fact that all Central Europe’s nation-states are intent on playing this power game, including those dealt with the weakest hand. For instance, the Macedonians, not recognized as a nation by Bulgaria, contest the Bulgarians’ claim to the first Bulgarian Empire by saying that it was actually created by the Macedonians. Macedonia employed a similar tactic toward neighboring Greece, which did not recognize the former state’s name until 2018. In this line of thinking, the Eurasian empire created by Alexander the Great was actually created by the Macedonians, not recognized as a nation by Bulgaria, contest the Bulgarians’ claim to the first Bulgarian Empire by saying that it was actually created by the Macedonians. Macedonia employed a similar tactic toward neighboring Greece, which did not recognize the former state’s name until 2018. In this line of thinking, the Eurasian empire created by Alexander the Great was not Greek, but rather Macedonian, since this warlord stemmed from the territory which is today part of the Macedonian state. Likewise, the Ukrainians contest Russia’s claim to Rus’ by pointing to the fact that the medieval polity’s capital of Kyiv currently doubles as the capital of modern Ukraine.

Due to the ethnolinguistic character of Central Europe’s nation-states, this politico-historic competition is smoothly extended to languages. Practically all South Slavic nation-states claim (Old Church) Slavonic as exclusively theirs, popularly dubbing it “Old Bulgarian,” “Old Macedonian,” “Old Croatian,” or “Old Slovenian.” In reality, this language was created in Greater Moravia and later successively polished in the Bulgarian Empire and Rus’. Russia claims Ruthenian (the language of Rus’) as “Early Russian,” to which the Belarusians and Ukrainians reply by dubbing it “Old Belarusian” and “Old Ukrainian,” respectively. Present-day nation-states with no credible early medieval polity to fall back on excel at emphasizing the uniqueness and antiquity of their language, which is “older than the Roman Empire.” This is the case of Albania and Estonia, whose ancestors and their distinctive languages were (presumably) mentioned by Ptolemy. Similarly, the nineteenth-century claim that Lithuanian is Europe’s oldest language due to its similarity to Sanskrit is now part and parcel of modern Lithuania’s national master narrative.

From a scholarly perspective, all these anarchistic and mutually exclusive national claims (in reality, stereotypes, prejudices, or anachronistic errors) to languages and medieval, or even antique, polities are methodologically faulty, subscribing to a set of unarticulated normative assumptions. First, with regards to the polities of a millennium or two ago, the typical fallacy is that a common political past may not be translated into separate political present in plural. Second, regarding national Einzelsprachen, the fallacy is that languages do not (or at least should not) change and each can be “owned” (that is, spoken and written) only by a single human group or nation. Hence, from the perspective of ethnolinguistic nationalism, neither in the past nor in the present day can a language be shared by several different nations or nation-states.

Aside from school history textbooks, these unspoken normative beliefs and the nationalized interpretations of the past have been reinforced through school atlases of history. The school atlas of history, as a textbook genre, has been commonplace in Central European schools since the mid-nineteenth century. However, it is relatively unknown elsewhere in Europe and the world. In part this is because only in Central Europe is legitimate statehood imagined as steeped in the national Einzelsprache, in accordance with ethnolinguistic nationalism’s formula, language = nation = state. But this tight spatial and conceptual overlapping (or “normative isomorphism”) of these elements is highly counterintuitive and fiendishly difficult to impart to schoolchildren without the cartographic prop of a map. In the material world languages and nations are invisible as entities because they are part of the social reality, which is stored in people’s brains. Yet, in Central Europe these are believed to be the very foundation of the region’s nation-states. A school atlas of history is an answer to this pedagogical dilemma. Maps as a hallmark of modernity are perceived as “scientific” and as real as railways or skyscrapers. Hence, it is an easy intellectual jump to the specious conclusion that a cartographic representation of the “historic” territory of a “national language,” as equated with the territory of a given (ethnolinguistically defined) nation, must be real in the terms of material reality. In turn, this ideologically motivated equation of the Einzelsprache and the nation constitutes the “real extent” of the territory of a today’s nation-state. Any seriously disjunction between the “real” (or rather, ideal) and actual extent of the nation-state’s territory gives rise to the national program of irredentism, or “bringing home” the as yet “unredeemed” fragments of “our nation.”

However, neither languages nor ethnic groups (nations) are “naturally” (or “divinely destined to be”) coupled together and contained within a single nation-state. This way of constructing and maintaining national statehood is rather unusual from the global perspective, and is primarily confined to Central Europe (alongside Southeast and East Asia). In the case of Central Europe this typical disconnection between states and languages can be usefully illustrated through a cartographic presentation of dialect continua that until after the Second World War were not coordinated with the political borders in central Europe.

The concept of dialect continuum is drawn from the analytical toolbox of areal linguistics. Prior to the rise of writing and its formalization in the form of distinctive and separable Einzelsprachen, people spoke language varieties (“dialects”) specific to their locality (village, town, or region). These localities corresponded to different human groups, the observed language (speech) difference divided them into (often “micro” or “village”) ethnic groups. Although a given dialect identified its speaker as a member of this or that local (ethnic) group, this language (speech) difference was too small to prevent successful communication with the speakers of neighboring dialects, belonging to other local (ethnic) groups. A dialect continuum is a spatially contingent “chain” of mutually comprehensible dialects corresponding to local micro-ethnic groups. A speaker of a dialect from the dialect continuum in question can travel from one end of this continuum to another, en route successfully communicating with inhabitants of increasingly distant villages and towns.
The space of mutual comprehension comes to an end where speakers of dialects from two different continua live side by side. But typically, this cleavage was never radical, rather a zone of bilingualism, the zone’s dwellers having a command of one dialect from dialect continuum A and another from dialect continuum B. In addition, local literati would know a written lingua franca (“international language”) and could help a linguistically challenged traveler.

Polities and Dialect Continua in the Ninth Century

A cartographic representation of dialect continua as blocks of solid color helps to disabuse the (Central European) reader from the present-day national preconception that today’s Einzelsprachen existed for a millennium or longer and that the territories where they are in use must correspond as much to present-day nation-states as to polities from the recent and distant past that are claimed as “national predecessors” of the former. It is immediately visible from the map that before the rise of the ethnolinguistic nation-state in Central Europe, the political borders were not coordinated with dialect continua or Einzelsprachen. In the ninth century (as to a degree, in the later periods through the mid-nineteenth century, when full literacy became the accepted norm actualized through compulsory elementary education for all) Einzelsprachen in the meaning of “written languages” were few and apart, their command limited to the extremely narrow stratum of literati, usually doubling as clergy of various monotheistic religions based on a “holy book.” In the case of Central Europe it was Latin in the Latin (Roman) alphabet of the Vulgate (canonical Latin translation of the Bible) for Western Christianity (or the Roman Catholic Church after the Great Schism of 1054), Greek in Greek letters of the Greek-language original of the New Testament for Eastern (“Byzantine”) Christianity, alongside the use of Hebrew in the Hebrew script of the Pentateuch among the diaspora of Judaeans (Jews). The Einzelsprache of Old Church Slavonic was devised only in the mid-860s and was gradually shaped through the translation of the Greek original of the New Testament into this new language, before it took off as the official language of the Bulgarian Empire at the turn of the tenth century.

The official name of the “Byzantine” Empire was Ῥωμανία (not to be confused with the modern nation-state of Romania, which before the mid-1970s was spelled as Румыния in English) in Greek for “Roman Empire.” The anachronistic name Byzantium was coined only by the Bavarian historian Hieronymus Wolf in his 1557 monograph on the history of the (East) Roman Empire, a century earlier extinguished by the Ottomans’ successful siege of Constantinople in 1453 (Volf 1557). Prior to that moment, Romania’s rulers had a better claim to the politically significant adjective “Roman,” despite the founding of the Holy Roman Empire in 962 in the west. Rulers of the latter hardly dared to use this adjective in international diplomacy before Constantinople’s power was decisively diminished beginning in the thirteenth century during the period of crusades. With his influential scholarship, Wolf successfully claimed the adjective “Roman” for the Holy Roman Empire and anachronistically denied its use to Romania, replacing it with the neologism “Byzantium.” As is clear from this example, ideologically motivated manipulations with the past are not a new thing and did take place before the age of nationalism.

Map 1 shows how the widespread employment of literacy was limited to the line of the Danube in the north and the easternmost reaches of the Carolingian Frankish Kingdom (or the predecessor of the Holy Roman Empire) in the west. This area largely coincided with the territorial extent of the (Western and Eastern) Roman Empire and its direct sphere of political and economic influence. However, the encoachment of the Caliphate, with its Einzelsprache of Arabic in the Arabic script of the Quran, was already being felt across the Mediterranean. The Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian historian of Czech ethnic, who wrote mostly in German, Constantin (Konstantin) Jireček, established a line bisecting the Balkan Peninsula from today’s Albania to Bulgaria, north of which Latin predominated in official inscriptions, and Greek south of this line. In memory of his intellectual achievement, this line is named the Jireček line.

The model of statehood as embodied by the Frankish Kingdom was an inspiration for local Scandinavian forms of statehood in the north. In turn, it was Germanic-speaking Norsemen who first implanted a rudimentary form of this type of socio-political organization among Slavic ethnic groups along the riverine (Dnieper) route from the Baltic to Romania in what later became Slavophone Rus’ While Rus’ and predominantly Slavophone Bulgaria decided to throw their cultural fate with Romania by accepting the Greek-language form of Christianity, the rulers of Slavic-speaking Greater Moravia wavered between it and the Latin language-based Christianity of the Holy Roman Empire. In the mid-880s they finally settled for the latter option, which entailed replacing (Old Church) Slavonic with Latin for official written use.

Apart from the aforementioned polities, in the north to middle sections of Central Europe there was an extensive area with no large polities that would emulate either the West or East Roman model. Indigenous forms of local statehood and non-scriptural (“pagan”) religions persisted. Some names of the extant ethnic groups (that can be seen as identical with their local polities and religions) were recorded by travelers (merchants or missionaries) and chroniclers from the Frankish Empire, Romania, and farther afield from the Caliphate. These ethnic groups tended to correlate well with respective dialect continua, because in the absence of writing everyday speech (“dialect,” or language difference) used to be the main ethnic marker, or in other words, the core of socio-political cohesion.

Interestingly, names of some ethnic groups are late medieval or even modern inventions for the sake of furnishing a later kingdom or a nineteenth-century national movement with a sufficiently “historic” pedigree to match that of a neighboring or dominant state. For instance, the ethnic group of Polanians was invented in the fifteenth century by the chronicler Ioannes Dlugossius (Jan Długosz) who was active in Poland-Lithuania (Długosz 1614 [1614]). Similarly, it was nationally-minded Slovak historians who projected the present-day national ethnonym “slovak” backward to the Middle Ages on the anach-
ronistic and not supported assumption that Slavophone predecessors of today’s Slovaks must have also referred to themselves as “Slovaks.”

The attested Slavophone ethnic group, Lendians, are an interesting case in this respect. In the course of the building and eastward expansion of the medieval polity of Poland they were extinguished as an ethnic and socio-political entity, perhaps as a result of numerous wars fought over their region between Poland and Rus’. However, their ethnonym survives in Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian as Лиах Liakh in the function of a traditional name for the Poles. In Osmanlica Poland was known as Lehistan, while to this day a Pole is lengyel in Hungarian. Furthermore, in Polish this ethnonym rendered as Lechita is employed as a poetic synonym for the ethnonym Pole.

Most of the placenames on the map are given in their historically attested forms from the ninth century with their present-day forms in parentheses, for instance, Jomsburg (Wolin). In some cases, the name did not change (for example, Volyn’), while in others two forms were used in writing, while only one survives to this day (for instance, Reginum/Regensburg). The limits of written sources for reconstructing the past is illustrated by the name Etelköz for the Black Sea land of Finno-Ugric Magyars (Hungarians). In Greek language sources it was variably recorded as Ατελ και Ούζου Atel kai Ouzou, Ατελ Ούζου Atelk Ouzou, Ατελχούζου Atelkouzou, Ατελούζου Atelouzou, or Ετέλ και Κούζου Etel kai Kουzou. Etelköz is a modern reconstruction of this name based on the Hungarian language.