

Attitudes from Above

How Ausbau-Centric Approaches Hinder the Maintenance of Linguistic Diversity and Why We Must Rediscover the Role of Structural Relations

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Abstract Modern linguistics tends to perpetuate an Ausbau bias by reserving the term 'language' for highly standardised varieties while classifying other varieties as 'dialects' and often leading to language contestation. This paper outlines some properties of the Ausbau bias, discussing its negative effects across ostensibly dissimilar communities. We will see how the Ausbau bias has attitudinal consequences, feeding a vicious circle of contestation and endangerment. The paper concludes with some suggestions on how contestation can be mitigated by moving away from the 'Ausbau-centric' tendency that views languages as mainly socio-political objects.

Keywords Attitudes. Ausbau. Contested languages. Language contestation. Linguistic diversity.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Cost of Language Contestation. – 2.1 The Ausbau-Centric 'Mother Tongue': Overlooking the Educational Needs of Multilinguals. – 2.2 Language Selection: What 'Language'? – 3 Standardisation Routes for Language Maintenance: What 'Language'? – 4 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

An internet search for a map of the ‘languages of Europe’ is likely to return rather conflicting results. The case of Italy is a prime example. Documents from the European Parliament website¹ report a range of languages that is closely matched to the twelve languages officially recognised by the Italian government (Law 482/99); while wikitongues.org contains information on all thirty-two languages of Italy as listed in the UNESCO Atlas of Languages in Danger (Moseley 2010), a net difference of twenty languages. The picture is further confused by Wikiversity.org,² which reports nine languages in a mishmash of some of the languages recognised by the Italian government (e.g. Franco-Provençal and Sardinian) and others that are listed in the UNESCO Atlas but lack official recognition (e.g. Lombard and Sicilian).

While to some degree this confusion could be attributed to the usual inaccuracies that plague the internet, or even to linguists’ failure to aptly popularise the subjects of their discipline, I believe there is a fundamentally conceptual problem at its basis. In fact, moving away from the internet and looking at published texts in linguistics won’t necessarily help: the European map in Pereltsvaig’s *Languages of the World* (2020, 28) shows two languages for Italy (Italian and Sardinian, the latter being the only one reported out of the twelve languages recognised by Italian law); Extra and Gorter (2001), on the other hand, are quite faithful to governmental decrees and give a mention to most of the twelve languages of Italy that enjoy official recognition; while the work of Coluzzi (2008; 2009) and Coluzzi et al. (2018) distinguishes between Italy’s ‘minority languages’ (i.e. those recognised by law) and ‘regional languages’, namely those languages that officials as well as the mainstream insist on calling ‘dialects’ but which are not dialects of any language.³

The fundamental issue is to do with the definition of ‘language’. Some authors, typically those who tend to (unwittingly?) align with governmental decisions, take a socio-political view of ‘language’, while others – who approximately align with the UNESCO Atlas – follow what we could call ‘purely linguistic’ criteria, namely criteria involving concepts such as linguistic distance and intelligibility, regardless of the socio-political success that the language at issue may have had. The problem arises when the former tendency to put

¹ See for example <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS-Briefing-589794-Regional-minority-languages-EU-FINAL.pdf>.

² https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/World_Languages/Europe.

³ Except of Latin, which seems to me a rather pedantic truism, if not a thinly veiled ideological urge to avoid the term ‘language’ at all costs.

socio-political considerations at the centre of ‘linguageness’ becomes the norm, as has been happening over the last five decades. Note that I am not claiming that socio-political considerations are always a bad idea, on the contrary. It makes perfect sense for sociolinguistic classifications to be heavily influenced by socio-policy. The issue arises when more generic classifications – and even classifications that purport to be non-sociolinguistic in nature, as is the case for texts on genealogy (e.g. Posner 1996) or language acquisition (e.g. Siegel 2010) – also end up being based on socio-policy. Why would a list of the languages of Europe – as opposed to a list of the ‘official’ languages of Europe or the ‘politically recognised’ languages of Europe – be compiled on the basis of socio-political criteria? The answer to this question is intertwined with the phenomenon of *Ausbau*-centrism (Tamburelli 2014; 2021a), namely the mainstream practice of ranking *Ausbau* characteristics (i.e. socio-political functions and regulatory officialdom) over *Abstand* ones (i.e. structural/linguistic distance and, by extension, intelligibility) across all sub-disciplines in Linguistics, including those that are not sociolinguistic in nature.⁴

Ausbau-centrism as a phenomenon is rooted in the wider concept of language attitudes, and specifically within the cognitive component of language attitudes, as it combines an established set of thoughts, beliefs, ideas and behaviours (e.g. Baker 1992; Garrett 2010; Oppenheim 1982) about what constitutes a language. This last point is quite central, as it may be what sets *Ausbau*-centrism apart from more familiar cases of language attitudes: it does not necessarily concern attitudes towards ‘a’ language; rather, it is the manifestation of a set of attitudes towards linguageness itself.

Looking at its defining traits, *Ausbau*-centrism is effectively a series of formal implementations of the infamous saying that is usually attributed to Max Weinreich: “a language is a dialect with an army and a navy”.⁵ Several formalisations have been proposed which effectively attempt to transform the saying into a formal model, perhaps most notably by Auer (2005) and Muljačić (1997), who developed complex apparatuses that place highly politically successful varieties on top as ‘languages’ while keeping all other non-militarised varieties lower down as different types of ‘dialects’. What is hardly ever discussed, however, is that Weinreich himself argued against the idea of delegating language classification to armies and navies, and that he had foreseen the damage that such stance could do. According to Maxwell (2018, 265), Weinreich disputed the message behind the saying, pointing out that it merely equates to stating that “the

⁴ The terms ‘*Abstand*’ and ‘*Ausbau*’ were originally introduced by Kloss (1967).

⁵ It appears that, although Max Weinreich may have been the first to publish the saying, he was not the coiner. See Maxwell 2018 for a history.

stronger is the more righteous” (1945, 13, cited in Maxwell 2018, 265) and that following its spirit would force Yiddish – which has no army and no navy – to be forever trapped “with the dialects with poor relations”. In a sense, we might say that Weinreich had identified Yiddish as a contested language, with sociolinguistic absolutism at the core of the contestation.

Unfortunately, not much has changed since 1945: more and more complex apparatuses have been built in order to strengthen the view that languageness is all about ideology and power (e.g. Blommaert 2005) or – even more bizarrely – that languages are all ‘made up’ (Makoni, Pennycook 2005). This trend has created a limbo for any varieties that are sufficiently structurally distant from related languages to be considered separate languages on the basis of structural linguistic properties (e.g. Lewis, Simons, Fennig 2014), but that at the same time do not boast a sufficient amount of sociolinguistic achievements to be considered ‘languages’ on Ausbau-centric grounds. This is the limbo of language contestation, and its members are the contested languages (Tamburelli, Tosco 2021).

2 The Cost of Language Contestation

Language contestation is not just the result of an academic disagreement; it has repercussions on languages and, by extension, on language communities. Weinreich had anticipated that equating languages with objects of power is equivalent to accepting that “the strongest is the more righteous” (1945, 13, cited in Maxwell 2018, 265), a rather prophetic prediction. However, what we see today as a consequence of several decades of Ausbau-centrism is more along the lines of: the strongest is the more right worthy. With dominant academic discourse shaping lay perception (e.g. Foster, Sharp 2002), sociolinguistic criteria have morphed from descriptive to defining, in what appears to be a successful example of the denying the antecedent fallacy: if a language is a dialect with an army, then a dialect without an army can’t be a language. This leads to the “Ausbau circle” (Tamburelli 2021a), a vicious circle where only varieties that already enjoy political recognition are granted (further) socio-political support, since – as the Ausbau-centric axiom goes – only varieties with some degree of socio-political power can be called ‘languages’, and therefore only speakers of socio-politically powerful varieties can readily access linguistic rights, as those rights are to be granted to speakers of ‘languages’ (see Tamburelli 2021a; 2021b for detailed discussions). In Tamburelli (2021a) I have shown how this has repeatedly hindered the emancipation of the endangered languages of Italy, which the *status quo* treats as anything but ‘languages’ on the basis of their sociolinguistic subordination to Tuscan Italian.

This, in turn, perpetuates negative attitudes towards the languages of Italy (see for example the work of Coluzzi 2008), which are not only perceived as being associated with ‘lower’ social domains, but also presumed as incapable of expanding from those domains.

Importantly, the damage done by Ausbau-centrism is far from limited to the languages of Italy. The same range of Ausbau-centric objections has been used to block the emancipation of Asturian (Wells 2011), Kurdish (Hassanpour, Sheyholislami, Skutnabb-Kangas 2012), Latgalian (Marten 2012) as well as creole languages (e.g. Brown-Blake 2008; Frank 2007) and sign languages (e.g. Fischer 2008) among many other of the world’s languages. Seeing as emancipation, and specifically the broadening of domains of use, is a crucial ingredient in the maintenance of linguistic vitality (e.g. Simons, Lewis 2013), it is clear that Ausbau-centric views of language are at the heart of language shift and of the loss of linguistic diversity. But the price we are paying for Ausbau-centrism does not stop at linguistic diversity.

2.1 The Ausbau-Centric ‘Mother Tongue’: Overlooking the Educational Needs of Multilinguals

South Tyrol⁶ (in the north-east of Italy) is officially recognised by the Italian state as a ‘bilingual community’, with German and Italian as two co-official languages (e.g. Glück, Leonardi, Riehl 2019). However, linguistically speaking, the Germanic variety spoken in South Tyrol belongs to Bavarian (ISO 639-3 bar) rather than German (ISO 639-3 deu). In typical Ausbau-centric fashion, however, the local variety is regularly referred to as a ‘dialect’, and duly denied any official recognition. Therefore, the Germanic ‘language’ recognised as co-official is not one of South-Tyrolean’s mother-tongues, but the Ausbau language genealogically closest to it, namely German. This distinction is made on the basis of sociolinguistic considerations, without giving any weight to any potential linguistic distance between the variety that is recognised as the purported ‘mother tongue’ and that which is actually acquired and spoken by the local population. This leads to a bizarre situation of strict Fergusonian diglossia (Ferguson 1959), whereby Germanic-speaking South Tyroleans have the right to education in their mother-tongue (e.g. Vettori, Wisniewski, Abel 2012), except that the language fulfilling the role of mother-tongue is mostly learned through education, while their actual mother-tongue affords them hardly any rights at all. This situation

⁶ Official name: *Provincia autonoma di Bolzano – Alto Adige / Autonome Provinz Bozen – Südtirol*.

exemplifies a major failure of Ausbau-centrism, with South-Tyrolean children being educated in a language they struggle to understand, while their own language is excluded from the educational system on the basis that it is ‘not a language’ due to its sociolinguistic profile. Leonardi and Tamburelli (2021) showed the impact that this Ausbau-centric practice has on South-Tyrolean children. Using the TROG-D (Test for the Reception of Grammar, Fox 2013), they examined the receptive German language skills of German and South-Tyrolean pre-schoolers, and found that the two groups differed significantly, with the German-speaking children outperforming their South-Tyrolean counterparts. This, together with the result that intelligibility between South-Tyrolean Bavarian and German as measured by a sentence recognition task is at 58.3%, shows at least two things. First, it is grossly inaccurate to claim that South-Tyroleans are fulfilling the right to education in their ‘mother tongue’, comparable to claiming that a Spanish speaker who is sent to a Portuguese-speaking school is educated in their mother tongue.⁷ Second, the Ausbau-centric practice of identifying languages on the basis of sociolinguistic criteria masks a complex linguistic situation and thus leads to a failure to meet the educational needs of multilinguals, with South-Tyrolean children not receiving the same level of education as those for whom the language of education is indeed their mother tongue. Note that this situation would not arise if languages were identified on the basis of structural linguistic criteria such as intelligibility or linguistic distance, as any such criteria would likely lead to the recognition that South-Tyrolean and German are not one and the same language (e.g. Egger 1979 on lexical and morphosyntactic differences between the two varieties). Therefore, the South-Tyrolean example highlights one particular case where relying on structural/linguistic (i.e. Abstand) criteria would lead not only to a more accurate language classification, but also to a more apt implementation of a community’s right to education in their ‘mother tongue’.

2.2 Language Selection: What ‘Language’?

A report by the organisation Translators Without Borders (TWB 2017) highlighted the widespread communication issues that regularly arose within aid camps during the Southern European refugee crisis. One specific issue came as a consequence of the seemingly sensible decision to employ Arabic-speaking interpreters, on the basis that the refugees were from Arabic-speaking countries. Leaving

⁷ A study by Jensen (1989) puts the intelligibility of Spanish and Portuguese at a comparable 58.1%.

aside the issue of minority language speakers (most notably Kurdish, see TWB 2017), the main cause of breakdowns in communication lies in the Ausbau-centric stance that Arabic is ‘one’ language. Unsurprisingly, TWB (2017) have reported on serious and recurring communication issues between speakers of purportedly the ‘same’ language. The varied levels of intelligibility across so-called Arabic ‘dialects’ are well-known, as is the fact that Arabic varieties are only called ‘dialects’ on a sociolinguistic (i.e. Ausbau) grounds, seeing as their linguistic distance can be considerable, and that structural-linguistic classifications subdivide Arabic varieties into separate languages, as evident from the fact that there are more than a dozen ISO 639-3 codes associated with them. But such is the hold of Ausbau-centrism that the structural-linguistic classifications do not tend to be known or even considered to be relevant outside of a small circle of linguists, and therefore the Ausbau-centric stance of ‘*the* Arabic language’ is what percolates up into the related disciplines, subsequently leading to the severe breakdown of communication reported by TWB (2017). When we consider the fact that refugees find themselves in extremely vulnerable psychological states (e.g. Carswell, Blackburn, Barker 2011), the impact of an Ausbau-centric approach to language identification becomes even more severe. As part of a linguistic analysis of the TWB report and its implications, Glackin (2022) measured the intelligibility of three Arabic varieties (Gulf Arabic, Egyptian, and Modern Standard Arabic) to Saudi-speaking listeners. The measurements were carried out with participants under stress in order to simulate a situation where listeners’ cognitive resources are reduced by the circumstances in which they find themselves, as is the case for refugees in a crisis situation. Stress responses were induced by manipulating cognitive load as the stressor under experimental conditions designed to measure sentential intelligibility as well as understanding of grammatical contrasts. Glackin’s findings showed that accuracy of response as well as the ability to react quickly to instructions (a crucial component in crisis situations) were dependent on the variety of the speaker, with Egyptian eliciting significantly lower intelligibility rates than Gulf Arabic. Once again, we see that the Ausbau-centric stance of ‘language by socio-politics’ can and does lead to negative downstream consequences which, in the case of a refugee crisis, can be disastrous.

This case is a particularly poignant example of why there is a need for linguists to rediscover ‘linguistic’ approaches to language classification (on this point, see also Dixon 1997) and possibly reduce some of the confusion that has been spreading as a result of Ausbau-centric linguistics.

3 Standardisation Routes for Language Maintenance: What ‘Language’?

So far, we have only seen cases where the Ausbau-centric approach fails, but a question remains: is there evidence that a linguistic (i.e. Abstand) approach provides more successful solutions?

One area where taking a linguistic approach has been shown to be superior is in the standardisation process for minority languages. Vari and Tamburelli (2023) compared two linguistic communities which followed two different routes to standardisation: the speech communities of the *Belgische Eifel* in Belgium and the *Éislek* in Luxembourg, where Moselle Franconian varieties are spoken. In both communities, the introduction of a standard was identified as an important step for the maintenance of the local Moselle Franconian varieties. This is in line with the literature on language maintenance, which puts the improvement of language attitudes at the forefront of language maintenance efforts (e.g. UNESCO 2003), and considers the provision of a standard for the local varieties as an important step in bringing about more positive attitudes (e.g. Fishman 2001; Lewis, Simons 2010).

The general idea is that standardisation widens a language’s domains of use (e.g. by allowing it to be introduced in formal contexts) as well as raise its status (e.g. by associating it with higher register domains). However, standardisation can be achieved in at least two ways. On the one hand, a community may choose to associate their variety with an already existing, highly regarded standard from a related language community. This standard may even be relatively distant from and/or only partly intelligible with the community language, as we saw for example in the case of South Tyrol. On the other hand, a community may opt for the development of an own standard, using one of its vernaculars as the basis for standardisation and thus more likely to end up with a very closely related and highly intelligible standard. The question that Vari and Tamburelli (2023) ask is whether both processes are viable routes to improving attitudes: is standardisation always good for the minority language, regardless of the chosen standard? To address this question, they compare implicit attitudes between standard and vernacular across the Moselle Franconian communities of the *Belgische Eifel* in Belgium and the *Éislek* in Luxembourg. These communities were chosen because they represent two different standardisation processes of essentially the same vernaculars. In Belgium, the *Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft* (of which the Eifel is part) adopted German as the standard for its Moselle Franconian varieties. Conversely, Luxembourg followed a different route, developing its own standard – namely Luxemburgish (ISO 639-3 ltz) – on the basis of the local Moselle Franconian vernaculars (Stell 2006). Results showed that implicit attitudes towards

Moselle Franconian vernaculars were considerably more positive in Luxembourg than in neighbouring Belgium, suggesting that choosing a standard on the basis of linguistic proximity (*Abstand*) rather than on pre-existing prestige (*Ausbau*) is more likely to lead to the desired outcome. Choosing German as the standard seems to have brought about more positive attitudes towards German itself, rather than towards the Moselle Franconian varieties whose vitality was meant to be improved.

Once again, it turns out that the *Ausbau*-centric practice of defining 'same language' on the basis of sociolinguistic achievements leads to a negative outcome. However, in this case we also see how using linguistic (i.e. *Abstand*) criteria, and specifically the criterion of linguistic proximity as a guide is likely a more fruitful approach to improving attitudes towards a minority language.

4 Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that an 'Ausbau bias' is strongly active within Linguistics, which has led to the widespread practice of *Ausbau*-centrism. This practice is rife in all areas of linguistics, and its bias permeates through linguistic communities, shaping attitudes and leading to a range of negative consequences. It perpetuates negative attitudes by equating 'language' with 'Ausbau language', which in turn feeds language endangerment via a vicious circle of contestation and endangerment: only 'languages' can access linguistic rights, and only *Ausbau* languages are 'real' languages. Seeing as *Ausbau* languages are – virtually by definition – also the languages that enjoy higher degrees of socio-political backing, *Ausbau*-centric practices are actively involved in the preservation of the *status quo*: only the sociolinguistically powerful can be sociolinguistically powerful. Hence, *Ausbau*-centric practices tend to conceal multilingualism as well as linguistic diversity, since only speakers of multiple *Ausbau* languages tend to be identified as multilingual. Further, *Ausbau*-centric practices also lead to failure to meet the educational needs of multilinguals (as in South Tyrol), are at the basis of communicative obstacles in high-risk situations (as in the case of the Southern European refugee crisis) and weaken the potential impact of standardisation processes in minority language situations.

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