

Fabrica conference: **Understanding Territoriality**

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'My Lingo, My Train'. The Free Movement of Languages and People

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Understanding territoriality means recognising that in very significant respects language is becoming increasingly de-territorialized. This is happening through the ever-increasing – and increasingly contested - movement of people across borders, combined with the ever-increasing flows of information around the world.

As we're constantly reminded, these phenomena provoke intense reactions. I'd like to start by considering two recent expressions of concern about migrants in London and their use of their native languages.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVZGgkdaE6E>

This woman is travelling on an Underground train through east London. She directs a tirade of abuse at two men who have been talking to each other in an eastern European language. 'Don't fucking sit on my train and speak about me behind my back in your lingo,' she yells. 'You know English when you want a job. You know English when you want a flat. You know English when you want

fucking anything. But when you want to try and talk about us on the train you talk in your own lingo.'

'My train.' That's telling. Regarding foreigners as suspicious and bilingualism as a way by which they manipulate British society, the woman insists that the train, and by extension everything else that is British, belongs to her. At another point in her rant she calls it a public train. She defines it as public territory and asserts her rights over it.

The man ultimately in charge of the train, the Mayor of London Boris Johnson, also recently expressed his views about how people from abroad should 'speak the lingo' in London, though his tone was more jocular and his language more moderate. Writing in his Daily Telegraph column, he fretted about how the internet and satellite TV allow immigrants to live in a 'foreign language bubble'. The implication is that they should use English even in their own homes.

Traditionally, British conservatives have drawn a clear distinction between public and private space. Johnson would doubtless be the first to agree with the old saying that an Englishman's home is his castle. But here, to his own admitted discomfort, he finds himself arguing that it only applies to Englishmen. Linguistically and culturally, people's homes should not be private territory. The only enclaves of foreign territory in London should be other countries' embassies.

The reasons for Johnson's concern become clearer as he goes on. 'In the face of the vast migratory influx we have seen,' he declares, 'we must insist on English if we are to have any hope of eupeptic absorption and assimilation'. Not integration: assimilation. Johnson makes great play of his classical education: that typically Johnsonian pattern of Latin and Greek assimilation is probably a fair indication of his ideal, in which English and England retain foreign words and workers that they find productive, while shrugging off the rest. Helping ourselves to words like 'bungalow' and 'tikka masala' is fine; having communities speaking Gujarati and Hindi isn't. The ideal is to make language and community homogeneous throughout the territory, with colourful foreign elements decorating an unambiguously English structure.

Johnson's problem is that this vision is unattainable. Part of the reason is territorial in the conventional sense: migrants do not disperse uniformly, like gases, but gather together in neighbourhoods where they can spend time with each other and develop resources to sustain their culture, like shops, clubs, places of worship and weekend schools for children. Where these communities become established, they tend to attract further migrants, developing their resources further, and so on.

This has long been the case. But there is a new factor at work. The classic migrant language story is that the first generation speaks the language of the old country and teaches it to the second generation, which also learns the dominant language of the society around it. People of the second generation

speak the heritage language to their parents and the dominant language to their children. From the third generation onwards, people may retain their ethnic identity but they lose their grasp of the language in which it was originally expressed.

It's easy to see how this happened in the past. Prejudice, aspirations, politics all played their part, often painfully. But the basic impediment was geographical. Imagine a migrant to America from, say, Italy a hundred years ago. On arrival she writes a letter home; it takes a week or two to arrive; by the time a reply has been written, sent and delivered, a month has gone by. Two generations later, her grandchildren's grasp of the language is almost entirely confined to the names of Italian foods and dishes.

For her equivalent today, though, the conversation never stops. She is on the phone the moment the plane lands; face to face on Skype every night; reading online news and chat – never really leaving home, virtually speaking. However far she travels, she never leaves her language community. Language is being de-territorialized.

In addition, legal migrants today have an unprecedented ability to visit their home countries either swiftly or at low cost, or often both. The situation is of course terribly different for those who try to migrate without authorisation. But overall, movement is freer and easier than it has ever been before. An eastern European EU citizen working in Britain can fly home in a couple of hours, or get

there in 24 hours on a coach if cash is short.

The character of migration may change profoundly as a result. Today's intra-European migrants make short visits home for family occasions, return for longer periods between jobs or to spend time as families, bringing their parents and their children together. In such situations we miss the point if we think of them as having exchanged one territory for another. Where they have gone has become their place; where they came from remains their place too. Migration is not a one-off, one-way relocation; it is a dynamic, two-way, ongoing process that changes the relationship between territories. Michał Garapich, a social anthropologist at the University of Roehampton's Centre for Research on Migration and Multiculturalism, calls it 'stork migration' – an allusion to the signature bird of eastern Europe, and a suggestion that it is more like the cyclical, seasonal migration of birds than the classic human story of no return. Yet this inter-territorial character is invisible to those in destination countries whose concern is with the numbers of migrants present at any one time - and it would make no difference to them if they were aware of it.

What will happen in subsequent generations? It's too early to say. Recent statistics from the US do show the classic pattern of heritage language loss in the third generation among Latinos. But if this new fluency of super-territorial communication is going to have the effects I suspect it may, it will act on the most recent migrants and so its effects will not yet be apparent. It will act by

enriching the native-tongue linguistic and cultural environment in which migrants live, sustaining their exposure to the language and multiplying their contacts with its speakers – which will give them social, economic, family and intimate opportunities that will serve as strong incentives to remain in the language community and thereby help to sustain it. Instead of occupying a small physical ethnic neighbourhood, they will be part of the much larger information networks of their homeland.

The question is whether their children will grow up in this extraterritorial information space. Under some conditions they will, and I'd like to make some observations about a case that I'm studying and writing about at the moment. I've recently returned from a field trip to Latvia, around which questions of territoriality are looming large because of its neighbour Russia's increasingly assertive and aggressive behaviour towards states like the Baltic republics which used to be part of the Russian empire and its successor the Soviet Union. Reports of Russian warplanes approaching Baltic republics' airspace and Russian naval vessels sailing close to territorial waters. Since the Baltic republics lack air forces, NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission makes interceptions as a form of symbolic, ritualised territorial defence. Latvia is not a typical case – there are no typical cases; each country has its own particular complexes – but it is a significant one.

The Latvian republic lives with existential angst, much of it focussed on the protection of the Latvian language. More than a third of the population of

Latvia speaks not Latvian by choice, but Russian. A quarter of the population is ethnically Russian too. Most of these Russian speakers are there because they, their parents or grandparents migrated to Latvia after it was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940. Many ethnic Latvians still regard the Russian speakers as 'occupiers'.

Their resentment reaches its peak on May 9 each year, when Russian speakers commemorate the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in what to them is the Great Patriotic War. The symbolic charge was especially high this year because it is the 70th anniversary of 1945 – and because the commemorative St George ribbons worn by thousands of the people attending have acquired a newly threatening significance since their adoption by pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

In Riga the main event is held at the Soviet-era Victory Monument, just down the road from the National Library where EU leaders met last week. Tens of thousands attended – the organisers claimed 220,000. In the evening it turns into a music festival, with overtones. People drape themselves in the Russian flag, and wave it from cars which they **decorate** in a kind of drag travesty as 'T-34' tanks, covered in slogans of the kind Red Army soldiers used to paint on their tanks. (They do seem to note the irony of doing this to German-built cars: this BMW is labelled 'Trophy'.)

But earlier in the day, the rituals are bound together by a deep sense of

affinity across the generations. Young people sing, and lay the flowers people bring as tributes. I was moved almost to tears at the sight of young parents, born decades after the war, encouraging their young children to present flowers to the few surviving veterans. Those children will surely grow up in a Russian space of symbols, culture and bonds between people, while living in Latvia and speaking Latvian every day.

Latvia can live with that. Despite the flag-waving, there seems little desire among Russian speakers for a territorial reabsorption by Russia. They generally appreciate the benefits of being in an EU country, and in any case tend to see themselves as somewhat different from the Russians in Russia. But they do want to live in the Russian information space. Latvia can't match the budgets for Russian TV game shows, movies or music videos. And in this space they are saturated in messages, explicit and symbolic, imparting the Russian government's view of the world and pursuing its interests. Political analysts recognise that Russia can use its soft power in the information space to subvert neighbouring states without violating their territorial integrity.

On the other hand, de-territorialized information spaces offer huge opportunities to smaller nations like Latvia, and their people. Another existential anxiety for Latvia is the seemingly inexorable decline in its population, which is now down to two million, having lost half a million people since regaining its independence. Much of this is due to emigration. The country may not be able to reverse it. But now at least its people can remain in

its language community within the internet, which may turn out to have an as yet unappreciated power to sustain languages that lack political strength and economic competitiveness. The electronic de-territorialization of language can be a powerful force for diversity. Among other things, it might turn out to save the world from being taken over by English.