

# Importance of language in the development of the nation state or cultural identit...

[Countries](#), [England](#)



There are various different ways in which people interact with one another, communication being the most common, and language being the most common form of communication. We use it to convey our emotions, thoughts and feelings, and to express ourselves. Language is an absolutely integral part of the survival of the human race, and a key aspect of various cultures. Whatever is considered meaningful to a group of individuals - from their daily routine to less regular traditions and rituals - constitutes a culture, and is obeyed and treated with respect by all members. Language is merely one such component, being both part of daily life and part of tradition, yet it is one of the most important. Whether this language is used by large percentages of the world's populations, such as English, or by significantly smaller groups, such as ethnic minorities who may speak a language of their own, it is undoubtedly a cornerstone of culture and vital to the development of a nation. For this essay, I will be discussing the role of language in the development of both the nation state and cultural identity, although I shall focus primarily on the latter.

The idea of the nation state, or 'nationalism', covers a broader spectrum than culture, making it 'notoriously difficult to define'. Nationalism unifies generations of people, even those who have never met. It is embedded with cultural practices and social behaviours, transcending time and location, and comes as a result of shared beliefs and values, expressed through social behaviour and traditional objects. It is a product of community, having developed from smaller social relations, and has expanded to cover a much larger group of people. These people were united through various factors, such as location, history, and language.

Let us take Germany during the early 1500s, for example. Between 1520 and 1540, three times more books were published in German than during the previous twenty years, due, largely, to Martin Luther and his infamous thesis. In fact, Luther's work accounted for roughly a third of all German works sold between 1518 and 1525. It is safe to say that Luther was, essentially, the first author who was able to sell new books purely on the basis of his name. Events such as these are what laid the foundations for national consciousness, first by creating means of communication in a language other than Latin, and secondly by providing reading material, rather than simply spoken word.

The transition from Latin to colloquial languages established geographic limits providing a sense of shared space among people. Gradually, readers would become aware of the thousands of other readers within their language boundaries, and that they were all unified by this. Print languages also helped stabilise and solidify a language, as it was now no longer 'subject to the individualising ... habits of monastic scribes'. Languages began to be catalogued, standardised through dictionaries. In this way, we can see the influence of language on the development of the state. Language connects people with one another; even if they have no common interests, are of different generations, and of a different social status, language unites people, who together form a nation.

There are a few exceptions to this; for example, Spain and Latin America both speak Spanish, yet they are of different nations, with very different cultural practices and behaviours. Also, many countries in Africa speak

multiple languages, as many tribes or groups have their own ethnic language. Many of these tribes also speak whatever language was left to them by a previous colonial ruler, such as French in the Congo from the time of Belgian rule. In this case, language would not be a unifying contribution to the idea of the nation state, as the nation is divided by many different languages. French is not the mother tongue, and is spoken for convenience more than anything else. Thus we see that language is not always of significant importance to the development of the nation state.

Language also plays a key role in the development of cultural identity. The term 'culture' is an expression, rather than a simple definition, linking us to places and people. It is the patterns of behaviour and thinking that people living in various social groups learn, create, and share. This generally refers to sets of traditions or rituals practiced by a group of individuals, which may involve anything from song and dance, to various props, such as articles of clothing. Culture is shared via communication, which is where language steps in; a country's language is a significant part of its culture. We can understand what is and isn't important to a specific culture by what is and is not present in its language. The words in this language are concepts that reflect the culture from which it is derived. Thus we can see that it is the spoken language that dominates, as it changes quicker and more frequently, and reflects the culture more directly.

Generally, cultures are proud of their native tongue. In the modern world, many countries are concerned that their mother tongue is becoming out of date; some are attempting to counter act this. For example, radio stations in

France must devote at least 40 percent of their music in French, in order to protect French recording artists from being overrun with English pop music. France is seeking to defend its culture against the influence of English, despite the fact that English is an increasingly popular language amongst the younger generation.

Languages that are spoken across large countries, or in many different parts of the world, will often form various accents, or dialects. By observing this, we can see that although each language plays a part in developing culture, different dialects can produce different cultures. A broad example of this can be seen in differences between American English and 'the Queen's English'; that is, United Kingdom English. This can be seen in the simplest of ways, such as choosing which version of English to set your computer to, as some words are not recognised in both types, or are spelt differently.

We can see that simply because two people speak the same language does not mean they share the same culture; someone from America would have different traditions to someone from England, and again, someone living on a cattle ranch in Southern America would have different traditions to someone living in an apartment in New York, just as someone living in a council house in Liverpool would have a different way of life to someone living in a townhouse in central London. Language certainly plays a role in this; were someone with a working class accent to come into money and purchase an expensive house in an upscale part of town among wealthy business families, would they be treated as though they had been there all their life? People sometimes associate a particular accent with a stereotypical

social characteristic; a 'working class' accent would produce an image of commonness, abrasiveness, and laziness.

This process by which language comes to be associated with certain geographic locations or social characteristics is known as the 'indexicality of language'. This can be observed in situations where speakers use different words or switch between two or more languages that play different roles within their society. This can be seen in the Latin American culture in the United States; Spanish is a large cultural element of Latin American life, and while a majority speak it on a daily basis, there are certainly those who do not, particularly the younger generations, whose lives are conducted primarily through English. This means that they are speaking English with a Spanish accent, which has gradually been shaped to form a distinctive dialect. This 'Latina' accent is recognisable, and is immediately associated with the Latin American social group, thus demonstrating the role of language in the development of culture; the Latin American culture is particularly strong.

However, while language aids the development of cultural identity, we can also see that it could in fact be creating divides in national identity. Due to certain dialects producing negative stereotypes, such as the working class accent exemplified above, those of a higher class may not wish to associate themselves with those of a working class background. Both classes may speak the same language, which should unite them on a much vaster level of national identity or the nation state, yet it keeps them apart on a cultural level. We can apply this theory to the Latin American community in the

United States also, along with other ethnic groups, such as African Americans; both groups converse in English, alongside Caucasian Americans, meaning that as a whole, they speak the same language and are all a part of the 'United' States. Yet each group has a dialect that sets them apart on a smaller scale, and associates them with certain social attributes. The English language has united them on a national level, while their accents have separated them on a cultural level.

The word 'dialect' itself can be a derogatory term. Edward K.

Brathwaite states that dialect is 'thought of as 'bad English' ... 'inferior English' ... used when you want to make fun of someone'. He is using the Caribbean as an example, stating that the idea for this stems back to the plantation, when African slaves were not allowed to speak their native languages and instead used broken and accented English. Brathwaite says he likes to think of this language as a 'nation language'. When the Europeans claimed the Caribbean, they insisted its peoples spoke English, forcing traditional languages underground. This influenced the English that Europeans brought with them - proper, Elizabethan English - resulting in a cultivated, unique version of English, exclusive to the peoples of the Caribbean. This in turn influenced the underground African languages, so that when they surfaced they were forced to adapt to a new cultural environment in order to survive.

Brathwaite believes that these languages, particularly Caribbean English, have had a major role in developing Caribbean culture and way of life. For example, many songs and stories - 'the culture itself' - were not written

down, but passed by oral tradition. What is also unique to this language are the sounds; the ' contours, [its] rhythm and timbre, [its] sound explosions'. In other words, these stories and \_must\_ be spoken, as to write them down means to lose the sounds and noises, which in turn means losing part of the meaning, of the cultural significance. In this way, we can see that not only has spoken language helped develop cultural identity, but that in some cases it literally \_is\_ cultural identity.

While the use of language has played a role in developing the nation state and a sense of pride in one's culture, actual language itself has also had a hand in shaping certain views of traditional beliefs. For example, language has had a hand in creating the idea that women are generally subordinate to men. This is embedded within language itself; most languages have male and female nouns and verbs, with the female one often being of lesser importance. Words can have added letters at the end to describe the female version, such as ' hero' becoming ' heroine', or ' lion' becoming ' lioness', or even the most basic example - ' man' becoming ' woman'. This can even be seen in commonly used expressions; ' you throw like a girl', for example.

This is a negative comment; it is derogatory to be likened to a physically weak female. Words such as ' mankind', rather than ' humankind', or ' man-power', rather than ' work force', also show the influence of men through language. While rights and equality for women have come on with leaps and bounds in recent decades, the female word being the secondary word was undoubtedly a result of male dominated thinking, which was the case at the



time of the development of languages, and this has lurked in our subconscious.

It is easy to simply say that language undoubtedly contributes to the development of cultural identity; after all, a language stems from an associated culture, and speaking it makes one feel part of a nation. Yet it is fair wonder how big a role language plays; let us take Ireland, for example. Irish is by no means the dominant language of Ireland, (in fact, less than forty percent of the population speak it on a daily basis, and this statistic does not apply only to those fluent in Irish) but does this mean that the Irish people are any less 'Irish' because of this? Following the invasion of the English several centuries ago, the Irish language suffered severe hardship, from which it has never really recovered. After the struggle for independence in the early twentieth century, multiple efforts were made to revive the Irish language, and pockets of Irish speaking areas, found mainly in the West of Ireland, were established as Gaeltachts, which aimed to promote and teach the Irish language.

Irish became very much a part of cultural tradition in Ireland, with many traditional songs and stories originally written down in Irish. Numerous popular Irish names are almost literal Irish words; Grainne means 'love', Aoibhean means 'beauty', and Fiona or Fionn means 'fair one'. The Irish people are evidently striving to keep their language alive, yet it played little part in the development of the 'official' Irish nation as such - that is, when Ireland gained their independence in the 1920s. Most of the political struggles and problems took place in the east of the country, primarily

around Dublin, where class divisions were very evident in Irish society at that time, and only the educated spoke Irish, as English was the mother tongue by this point (Irish had never quite recovered from the invasion of the English).

This meant that Ireland's struggle for freedom – and indeed the creation of the Irish nation – was conducted largely through English. It is fair to say that this has had a negative impact on Irish culture; many Irish place names have been anglicised, Ireland's capital being a prime example. 'Dublin' was once 'Dubhlinn'. Irish translations are seen on signposts, maps, and public transport stops, in an attempt to reincorporate the Irish language into every day society. In fact, the Irish translation often appears above the English, despite the fact that English is predominantly the mother tongue.

What role, then does the Irish language play in the development of Irish cultural identity? Culture is generally defined as the behaviour and traditions of a group of people, meaning that it is a live activity – and the Irish language is hardly thriving. However, it does live, and can be observed in the behavioural patterns of contemporary Irish society; for example, the Irish language network TG4 welcomes the modern position of the Irish language, producing modern day shows and programmes through Irish, such as 'Pop 4' and 'Paisean Faisean', which deal with current music and fashion trends respectively. Thus we can see how Ireland is attempting to incorporate its traditional language into modern society, showing that one can partake in the largely English dominated modern world while still speaking Irish. This

paves the way for another question; would Ireland be in the economic position it is in were it still speaking Irish as a mother tongue?

English is arguably the most dominant language of Europe, and the main language of the United States. It is almost a necessity to have at least basic English in the present day, and as Ireland is significantly smaller than many other wealthy European countries whose first language is not English, it is unlikely that it would be as desirable a country to emigrate to were English not the mother tongue. From this, we can see that language certainly has played a part in the development of the Irish culture. The English language has developed the modern aspects to Irish culture, opening many doors for the Irish population and allowing them to partake in European society.

The Irish language, however, played a much larger role in the development of traditional culture. It is instantly recognisable throughout the world as 'Irish'; the word 'Failte' for example, can be found in innumerable 'Irish' bars abroad. The Irish language has been a key factor in creating Irish culture, whether most of the population speak it fluently or not. Irish means nothing in the economic and business world, therefore the simple fact that Ireland is trying so hard to hold on to the language is evidence enough of how important it is to their cultural identity.

In many cases, language is unique to its culture; even if it isn't, there is almost certainly a dialect that differentiates one culture from another. For this reason, language plays a most important role in the development of cultural identity. It allows people to express their identities, knowing that

they are part of a nation who all speak the same language, and are therefore connected on some level. Language allows individuals a greater flexibility to express identity than racial make-up or ethnic background would. Through choices of language, people constantly construct and re-construct their identities; for example, a Yugoslavian becomes a Slovenian, or a Latvian remains a Latvian, even within the Russian state.

Through an examination of the development of language, we can observe how it has provided a basis for cultural identity. We are not born with an inherent sense of culture and identity embedded within us; it is something that we learn, usually from a very young age, and generally we learn through language. Thus we can see the effect that language has on culture, and our cultural identity. In order to embrace this identity, we must learn about it. We are all members of 'society' or part of a 'nation', and to belong to a particular nation is a sense of identity. Language helps articulate these identities.

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This is more in reference to the previous ' Celtic Tiger' rather than the current recession.