

Autere, Mikko & Länsisalmi, Riikka (eds.). 2024. *Nationalismi ja kieli*. [Nationalism and language] (Tietolipas 289). Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. Pp. 419.

Reviewed by Fred Karlsson

1 Introduction

The relationship between language and nationalism continues to be a central topic in sociolinguistics, political science, cultural studies, and history. Recent literature has expanded on classical theories by incorporating global perspectives, migration, the dynamics of minority language preservation, language policies, and even the effects of digital communication and, lately, AI. The volume under scrutiny here is a timely contribution to topics such as those mentioned.

The book contains a lengthy introduction by the editors Mikko Autere and Riikka Länsisalmi, both affiliated with the University of Helsinki, Autere as senior lecturer of South-Asian Studies and Länsisalmi as senior lecturer and docent of Japanese Studies. The bulk of the material is organized in two subsections. Part I is under the heading “Nationalism and Language Development” and contains six contributions. Part II, with four contributions, has the heading “Nationalism and Language in Education”.

The background of the book is a BA-level course offered to students of languages and linguistics at the University of Helsinki. As much of the general discussion over the last few decades has had a predominantly Western bias, it is to be welcomed that most material here presented concerns the languages and political situations in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Commendable is also that the authors have done empirical hands-on research on the languages and countries they discuss. Occasionally, however, this leads to a wealth of details where the general overview might get lost.

In their introduction, the editors provide an overview of the theoretical development of nationalism-related theories. Classics like Benedict Anderson (2016 [1983]) and Eric Hobsbawm (1993 [1990]) are duly presented and frequently referred to, also by the authors of the individual chapters. Autere and Länsisalmi point out that, for a long time, practitioners of language studies had little interest in the relations between language and nationalism. The reason was that during the long philological phase of (especially European) language studies, the interest of researchers was mostly focused on well-described European languages with long traditions of writing in (relatively speaking) homogeneous language communities where the main language was taken as a self-evident component of ongoing nation-building. The attitudes towards language were normative-prescriptive and the central emphasis was on purity and standardization. In this regard, by the way, nowhere in the book is there a reference to Per Linell’s relevant study (2005) on the written language bias in linguistics.

The strong turn in scholarly language studies from historically inclined philology to (descriptive and theoretical) linguistics in the course of the first half of the 1900s brought with it an upsurge of new and under-researched problems: the wealth of languages in most countries, the enormous linguistic diversity in the extra-European parts of the world, severe problems concerning increased needs for language-related education, etc., and therefore explicit language policies had to be developed. Autere and Länsisalmi duly point

out that nationalism in the scholarly sense of the word is not to be mixed or associated with negative associations deriving from ultranationalism, jingoism, or extreme-right political movements.

One of the central concepts that turns up in many of the book's chapters is nationalistic language ideologies. They are beliefs or convictions deriving from nationalistic thoughts or attitudes and manifest themselves in real situations of language use, not least in the exercise of political power. Perhaps the most widespread ideology is the common naïve majority member belief, a combination of cultural homogeneity and monolingualism, that the majority language is the primary and "natural" one and that the minority languages (if noted at all) are exceptions that do not deserve the same respect, status, or educational and other political observance. These ideologies are central in shaping social realities, of which one of the most important is the many-levelled schooling system in a country. The imagined communities postulated by Benedict Anderson 2016 [1983] are constituted in part by language ideologies, shared historical and cultural perceptions, and above all, a somewhat mythical experience of belonging together.

Autere and Länsisalmi's description of the rise, development, and spread of language-based nationalistic thought and political practice is well-informed and builds a nice bridge to the substantive chapters in Parts I and II.

2 Part 1: Nationalism and Language Development

The first contribution is "Nationalism and the Position of Finnish in the History of a Multilingual Finland", by Pirkko Nuolijärvi, formerly Director of the Institute for the Languages of Finland. I quote how the Institute describes its activities on its website because this is a typical example of a nationalism-inspired official institution:

The Institute for the Languages of Finland (Kotimaisten kielten keskus or Kotus) is a national expert institute specialised in languages. Our tasks include the planning of Finnish and Swedish and the coordination of the work of the Saami, Romani, and Sign Language Boards. The Institute for the Languages of Finland carries out language and name planning, and compiles dictionaries. We also maintain various linguistic corpora and archives. (www.en.kotus.fi)

The Finnish and Swedish subtasks have been vindicated and supported by various governments since Finland declared her independence from Russia in 1917, but the promotion of Saami, Romani, and Sign Language are of much younger date, starting with Saami in the 1970s.

Nuolijärvi shows how the ideologies of Finnish primacy and of monolingualism have arisen and developed among the Finnish population even if the external conditions have changed dramatically, given that the area we now call Finland for six centuries was a part of Sweden, and 1809–1917 part of Russia. More or less vague remnants of these phases certainly are present as undercurrents in the Finnish collective mind. The monolingual ideal was the driving force of Johan Vilhelm Snellman. In the second part of the 19th century he was the mastermind for making Finnish the principal official language; since the Middle Ages, Swedish had had that position also in the Eastern Finnish area. Nuolijärvi nicely demonstrates how the composition of Finland's population has always been more multilingual than what is generally believed. It strikes me that the century-long, basically peaceful transformation of the principal language from Swedish to Finnish,

on the suggestion of the “losing party”, the Swedish-speaking Finns themselves, like Snellman and others, probably is internationally unique in a way that has not always been stressed enough in the historical and sociolinguistic literature.

At first sight, the title of Johanna Ennser-Kananen, Mia Halonen and Taina Saarinen’s contribution appears somewhat abstract: “Language, Knowledge and the Perpetuum Mobile of Epistemic Nationalism in Finland”. Epistemic nationalism is equal to claiming primacy for knowledge organized, communicated and taught through the (primary) national language in a nation state, consequently establishing a hierarchy among it and other secondary but relevant languages. Arguing by way of critical discourse analysis, the authors provide an incisive analysis of the nature and consequences of the 2019 proclamation by the Finnish Language Office (Kielilautakunta) at Kotus, especially concerning its evaluation of what risks are inherent in the degree of current influences of English upon Finnish, not primarily as a language, but on its domains of use. In Finland, as in most countries, English is perceived to conquer central domains of use, especially in scholarship, (higher) education and popular culture.

In terms of Finnish language policies, the authors note that the long period up to the 1980s can be characterized as nationalistic, focusing on the status, development, and uses of the national languages Finnish and Swedish. The period from the 1980s to the 2010s, Ennser-Kananen, Halonen and Saarinen characterize as post-nationalistic, dominated by internationalization, globalization and growing concerns about the spread of English. The growing use of English in doctoral dissertations entails less use of languages other than Finnish; the share of Finnish seems stable at around 1/5. The authors claim that the 2019 proclamation exaggerates the risks of the increasing use of English for Finnish knowledge representation. This 2019 document is highly focused on the classical agenda of promoting national languages.

Ennser-Kananen, Halonen and Saarinen also point out (the obvious fact) that the notion “language” can be construed on several levels of abstraction. On more abstract levels, the connections to “reality” (variable individual language proficiencies, multilingual situations, language contacts, etc.) tend to be forgotten. This is, of course, true. But on the other hand, linguistics cannot be reduced to mere variability, listing of variants or meaning equivalences. Theory construction presupposes abstraction. Ennser-Kananen, Halonen and Saarinen’s chapter certainly invites further discussion.

The topic of Oksana Kanerva and Johanna Viimaranta’s chapter is “Language Legislation as a Manifestation of Language and Nationalism in Ukraine”. This is a knowledgeable but also tragic exposition of the almost insurmountable complexities and animosities that arise when there is more than one large group of speakers of different languages, and centuries of cultural and political dissonance and oppression are mixed with strong nationalistic attitudes and feelings. The authors note the often-forgotten fact that the Soviet Union was not officially formed on a monolingual nationalistic basis. Some official leeway was left for regional minority languages, but in reality, they were over the years largely bulldozed by Russian. Kanerva and Viimaranta trace the historical developments and relations between the language groups up to the present catastrophic situation. Ukrainian language legislation is compounded by the existence of at least 18 regional languages and the absence of reliable up-to-date census data. From a purely linguistic point of view, there is the existential question of the identity of the very Ukrainian language as a distinct entity. As these lines are being written, Russia and Putin are insisting, by the use of military force, on the reintroduction of Russian as an official language in Ukraine.

The topic of Mikko Autere's chapter is "The Persian Language: A Cosmopolitan Shrunk within the Borders of a Nation State". From the perspective of millennia, Persian is in the company of Chinese and Greek, from times before the Common Era. In the Middle Ages, Persian extended over an enormous geographical area, from the Balkans in the west to Bengal in the east, having become a truly cosmopolitan and also a pluricentric language with locally prestigious and influential city hubs in several places. However, with the rise of Turkish in the west, Russian in Central Asia, and Urdu in the east, the position and status of Persian declined and is presently mainly confined inside the borders of Iran, where a nationalized position has been established for the language now called Farsi, even if no more than half of the population speaks it as a native language. Persian lives on also in Tajikistan as Tajik and in Afghanistan as Dari. Farsi, Tajik and Dari are all mutually understandable.

Lotta Aunio writes on "Swahili: A National Language Extending beyond its Borders". Some 120 languages are presently spoken in Tanzania. Swahili has been spoken for 1000 years along the east coast of Africa. Tanzania is unique among the African states in having an autochthonous language as the national language. This promotion was due to the decisiveness of Tanzania's first president, Julius Nyerere and his socialist *ujamaa* policies. He was one of the first fighters in the 1950s aiming at freeing native Africa from the colonial yokes. Swahili is now the language of primary schools, parliamentary sessions and a marker of Tanzanian identity. In the course of many centuries, it has also developed into a significant lingua franca for Eastern Africa, due to the long-term Bantu expansion in Africa. However, the national position is highly contested and far from the classical (unrealistic) ideal of one nation – one language. A majority of Tanzanians speak some other language than Swahili at home. Swahili also carries heavy connotations of close connections to colonialism. Aunio's description of these historical burdens and their related present-day problems is informative and eye-opening for readers mostly accustomed to the (relative) homogeneity of Europe's states.

"Nationalism and Language in the Philippines. From National Language toward a Multilingual National Identity" is Eeva Sippola's topic, another local instantiation of the problem of establishing a post-colonial modus vivendi in a country with up to 200 indigenous languages and wide geographic dispersion over islands. Spanish, English and Filipino (based on Tagalog) have all been national languages; English and Filipino still are today. Filipino is used for nationwide communication, administration, primary and secondary schools and popular culture. English is mainly used in universities, economic transactions and media. Local vernaculars are used in daily life and among neighbours, and increasingly in primary schools; the latter is an interesting feature, still very uncommon in the West. Multilingualism is widespread among Filipinos, also on a daily basis. The Philippines were a part of Imperial Spain from the 1500s to 1898 but Spanish was used only by the colonial upper class. There was no perception of a special Philippine identity by the collapse of the Spanish Empire. American colonialism dominated the Philippines until WW2. Confronted by the wealth of local languages, the American rulers gave up their attempts to establish a locally based primary school system and chose an easy way of using English. As a consequence, a few decades later, a sizeable proportion of the population was proficient in English. In 1938, Tagalog was chosen as the basis for the national language, mainly because it had been widely used in politics and the economy. Filipino has been purposefully developed to serve also in academia and administration, but considerable resources are also spent on other central local languages. Overall, generally accepted national multilingualism is on the agenda, even though it might be an unattainable goal.

3 Part II: Nationalism and Language in Education

Riikka Tuori has given her contribution the title “Nationalism and Modern Hebrew: An Examination of Israeli Hebrew Textbooks”. As background for her exposition, Tuori sketches the origins of Zionism, the official national ideology of Israel. The indirect and distant relation between Palestine as a geographic territory and the political and religious aspirations of early European Zionism makes Israeli nationalism unique. However, since its early days, Zionism has come in many forms and with various and mutually conflicting political and religious views, still clearly to be seen today. In the late 1800s, European Jews spoke Yiddish and local European languages. Early nationalistic dogma prescribes that one country should have one language – the Jews lacked both. For obvious reasons, classical Hebrew was chosen as the national language in spe. Its revitalization was a surprisingly speedy process and the Jews, having moved from the diaspora to Palestine, spoke Hebrew already in the first decades of the 1900s. In 1949, the Israeli government founded the *ulpan*-system, an effective form of language school where Jewish newcomers are taught Hebrew and other societal integration by participation in intensive courses comprising some 420–450 lessons in the course of five months. Today, Zionism is an integral part of the Israeli state and nation. Hebrew and Arabic were both official languages until 2018, when that status was stripped from Arabic. The school system is strictly bifurcated based on language, with the Arabic part getting less funding. The universities are strictly Hebrew-based. The Israeli state calls the Arabic-speaking citizens Israeli Arabs, even if many of them would rather call themselves Israeli Palestinians. The well-known ongoing religious, ethnic, political, and presently (August 2025) even military conflict between the two groups seems more or less impossible to reconcile. It comes as no surprise when Tuori notes the overwhelming impact on the Israeli textbooks of the Jewish religion, worldview, history, etc. The Jews are rendered as the original population of Palestine; Jewish immigrants are repatriates and simultaneously direct descendants of the Biblical Israelis. In short, in many flagrant cases, the textbooks are tools for disseminating Zionism and the propaganda of the Israeli government, although there have been some developments in a more objective direction in the 2010s.

The title of Irina Piippo’s chapter is “Designing a Common Language. Reflexes of Arab nationalism in Language Education”. The unique feature about the Arabic language situation is its diglossia. Most of the numerous vernaculars are not mutually understandable. On the other hand, there is Classical Arabic *an sich* and its codified version, the *al-fuṣḥā* (Modern Standard Arabic), both of which are symbols of Arabic unity and the cornerstone of the Pan-Arabic nationalistic ideal of one people. On top of that, Classical Arabic is used as the ultimate, once and for all times, written expression of Islam. Arabic nationalism started to rise in the late 1800s, roughly at the same time as Zionism. *Al-fuṣḥā* has no native speakers and is rarely used in everyday situations. Piippo bases her analysis of the relations and ideological tensions between *al-fuṣḥā* and the vernaculars on the theory of language ideologies. Comparatively speaking, the Arabic register tensions are very strong, perhaps matched only by those of Chinese. The distinction between the two is not as absolute as has sometimes been claimed. Napoleon’s campaign to Egypt around the year 1800 lasted only a few years and was followed by the supremacy of the Ottoman Empire. During that time, influences from the West led to the development of *al-fuṣḥā*, especially of its vocabulary due to the modernization of everyday life, and it started being used in administration and education. The pedagogical and didactic problems facing teachers of Arabic (both natively and as a foreign language) are formidable. Piippo has

spent several years doing field work in the Arab world (Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt) and has accumulated considerable expertise. Her hands-on observations shed new light on the contacts and switches between *al-fuṣḥā* and vernaculars in real situations of use, especially in language teaching and learning.

Riikka Länsisalmi's contribution is called "Our Japanese and Theirs. The Two Faces of Language Teaching". The title refers to the bifurcation between Japanese conceived as a native versus a second or foreign language, which is especially strong in Japan. Chinese political, cultural and religious influences upon Japan were overwhelming for centuries. The earliest marks of Chinese writing imported to Japan are from the first millennium Before the Common Era. Portuguese missionaries and colonialists entered Japan around 1530 but from the 1630s to the 1850s, Japan had turned inwards and was a closed society. The organized development of the Japanese language has been closely intertwined with the evolution of Japanese nationalism, particularly from the Meiji period (1868–1912) onward which was the formative period of modernization. Before the modern era, Japan had no unified spoken or written standard. Classical Chinese was used in official writing, and Japanese vernaculars varied widely across regions, often divided by ragged natural geographical barriers. However, with the Meiji Restoration and Japan's drive toward modernization and national unity, the government sought to establish a common language as a tool for forging national identity. During the early 20th century, especially in the era of Japanese imperialism, language policy was tightly linked to nationalist ideology. The Japanese language was promoted as a symbol of cultural superiority in the empire, and it was imposed in colonized regions such as Korea and Taiwan. Standardized Japanese thus became both a marker of Japanese identity and a tool of assimilation and control. Simplifying matters a bit, the distinction between the terms *nihongo* (*nippongo*) 'Japanese language' and *kokugo* 'national language' underlines the difference between foreigners (speaking *nihongo*) and natives (speaking *kokugo*). *Nihongo* is also a neutral term for the language and *kokugo* a term for the ideological underpinning of Standardized Japanese. This new standard was based largely on the dialect spoken by the educated class in the main city, Tokyo – a principle followed by many other countries as well. Language reform was implemented through education, the military, and media, where the standardized language was taught and promoted. These efforts aimed to reduce dialectal variation and promote linguistic unity as a reflection of political and cultural unity.

Juhana Salonen is an expert on Finnish Sign Language and writes on "Language Education from the Perspective of Sign Language Users: In the Whirls of the Restricted Nationalistic Language Ideology". The nationalistic language ideology has more or less expressly permeated most of the chapters commented on in this review. Its three central components could be spelt out as (i) a single, standardized language is essential for national unity; (ii) that language embodies the cultural and political identity of the nation; (iii) other languages or dialects are often seen as less legitimate or even threatening to national cohesion. By the additional attribute of *restricted* nationalistic language ideology, Salonen refers to the still occasionally encountered refusal to accept that sign languages are full-blown natural languages. Sign language users¹ in Finland and elsewhere have for

¹ I use the English expression sign language user here in the sense of 'a native user of some indigenous sign language, e.g. Finnish Sign Language' (corresponding to the Finnish word *viittomakielinen*). There are (at least) some 200 sign languages in the world and they are not directly mutually understandable. One of them is Finnish Sign Language, another Finland-Swedish Sign Language, a third, American Sign Language.

hundreds of years been at odds with this ideology, and frequently victims of disregard and suppression. The situation has taken a turn for the positive in Finland with some legislative advances. However, Salonen documents several well-researched examples of how far Finland still is from putting sign language users on an equal footing with primary users of oral languages, especially the main national language. His examples are drawn from several levels of the education system (where Finnish Sign Language is not adequately taken into account nor offered as an alternative), and from encounters between medical or social service personnel and sign language users, where the rights of the latter are not always respected. Such shortcomings can have serious detrimental consequences, of a developmental, emotional and social nature, as Salonen duly shows.

4 Evaluation

The book *Nationalismi ja kieli* is well edited and of high quality. A special value comes with the emphasis on Eastern Europe (including Finland), the Middle East, Africa and Asia, encompassing several of the most intricate multilingual situations in the world. What is lacking (despite 419 pages!) is a chapter offering a comparative view, where general conclusions could be attempted. What I have in mind is the volume by Barbour and Carmichael (2000, eds.) on *Language and Nationalism in Europe*, the last chapter of which has the title “Conclusions: Language and National Identity in Europe” (somewhat surprisingly, this book is not considered or even mentioned anywhere in *Nationalismi ja kieli*). But perhaps strong global generalizations are hard to find, given the different courses of historical development and the variance documented in standardization and establishment of national/official languages. All in all, I am sure the contents of *Nationalismi ja kieli* would be appreciated by an international readership if offered in translation.

References

Anderson, Benedict 2016 [1983]. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Barbour, Stephen and Carmichael, Cathie 2000 (eds.). *Language and Nationalism in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hobsbawm, Eric 1993. *Nations and Nationalism since 1789. Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Linell, Per 2005. *The Written Language Bias in Linguistics. Its Nature, Origins and Transformations*. London: Routledge.

Contact information:

Fred Karlsson
University of Helsinki
Department of Languages
fred.goran.karlsson@gmail.com