

## **REVIEW: LANGUAGE, NATION AND POWER**

*Wilson McLeod*

Robert McColl Millar, **Language, Nation and Power: An Introduction.**

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, ix + 232 pp, pb, £17.99, ISBN 1-4039-3972-1.

This new handbook by Robert Millar, a Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Aberdeen, considers the diverse ways in which different varieties of language can come to define communities, some of which emerge as nations and, conversely, how nations and governments have dealt with the myriad political issues relating to linguistic diversity. The book's particular strengths lie in its extensive and careful use of linguistic typologies and theoretical classifications to show distinctions, permutations and possibilities. Much of Millar's theoretical presentation is a synthesis of existing scholarship rather than an original exposition, but he provides his own distinct perspective throughout the book, particularly in relation to his use of case studies and examples, and he gives distinct judgements of his own on key questions. Even if the book is formally an 'introduction' it is densely detailed and analytically rigorous.

Although it forms only a relatively small part of his wide-ranging discussion, Millar's analysis of dialect, language and the Scottish nation (a topic which he tackles at different points in the text in illustration of his broader exposition) will be of particular interest to readers in Scotland. It is a commonplace that language plays only a limited role in Scottish national(ist) movements and in Scottish national identity more generally; both historians and social scientists addressing the topic have tended to give language questions relatively little attention, and their analyses have sometimes been superficial or misleading. As such, Millar's discussion, which is informed by a deep knowledge of linguistic

---

*Wilson McLeod is a Senior Lecturer in Celtic at the University of Edinburgh.*

### *Scottish Affairs*

theory and international experience in relation to language politics and policy, makes a valuable new contribution.

The book begins with a review of the functioning of bilingualism and multilingualism in different social contexts (including the key problem of diglossia) and the ways in which different polities have managed these linguistic issues, including, crucially, the ways in which particular linguistic forms have come to coincide with 'national' boundaries and borders. To explain how some varieties become privileged as 'national' languages, Millar looks closely at the complex problem of the relationship between languages and dialects, giving particular attention to the work of the German linguist Heinz Kloss (1904-87). Kloss is best known for his concepts of *Abstand* and *Ausbau* languages, the former referring to 'languages believed by speakers to be distinct because of inherent linguistic distance' from other varieties, the latter to languages by development, that is, languages that have been programmatically differentiated from related varieties through language planning (p.46). However, there is often a grey area between *Abstand* and *Ausbau*, and certain language varieties can be placed in various intermediate positions, especially that of *Halbsprache* or 'Ausbau dialect', in which the variety is used for a range of intermediate functions but effectively excluded from other important domains, most crucially that of non-literary prose (*Sachprosa*). Any given form must be classified in relation to other languages and, indeed, with reference to a particular point in history. Thus Scottish Gaelic is *Abstand* vis-à-vis English but *Ausbau* vis-à-vis Irish, while Scots might once have been considered an *Ausbau* variety vis-à-vis southern English but now, following centuries of diminished prestige and functionality, occupies a closer position, arguably that of *Halbsprache*.

Millar then devotes four chapters to analysis and testing of theories, outlining and assessing different models first of the language standardisation process and then of the language planning process. In each he uses a wide range of examples, primarily but not exclusively involving European languages, exploring different aspects of the challenges and strategies relating to English (in both Britain and in the United States), French, German, Norwegian, Greek, Turkish, Russian, Hebrew, and Irish. Language standardisation is integrally connected to the *Ausbau* process, as particular varieties come to be put to new purposes and used in new settings, and gain new prestige as a result. State power is often crucial here, a provider of both political impetus and institutional mechanisms (the structures of administration, the education

### *Review: Language, Nation and Power*

system). Language planning then secures the chosen variety in formal terms, regulating, among other things, its word-stock, grammar and pronunciation.

Millar's most detailed discussion of the Scottish situation comes near the end of the book, in his chapter on 'Language and Nation-building', in which he explores the linguistic challenges facing polities that are undergoing significant, typically rapid, structural change. This discussion builds upon his brief but convincing analysis of Scots as 'a failed example of language standardisation', through which 'Scots came close to achieving systematic prescriptive regularity' in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but then had its 'distinctiveness gradually subsumed into the greater whole of written English' following the Unions of 1603 and 1707 (p.89).

Looking at Scotland's current situation in relation to the problem of smaller nations and larger political conglomerations, Millar presents the matter of Scots in relation to how Scotland 'might wish to express its developing political autonomy in terms of its linguistic difference from its overarching polity' (p.189). He outlines the range of ideological disputes and conceptual challenges that have tended to block progress in relation to corpus and status planning for Scots. Particularly useful is his distinction between what he calls the 'official party', those who seek to extend Scots into 'all domains of literary and non-literary activity which are currently occupied by English', and the 'cultural party', who are more concerned with issues of perceived authenticity and connection to the vernacular culture with which Scots has come to be associated in modern times (p.193). Such debates are symptomatic of efforts to promote minorised languages, although the conflicts in relation to Scots seem particularly acute.

As a result of these obstacles and conflicts, and despite the extent of its earlier development, Scots has failed to grow into a distinct *Ausbau* variety. One key factor here, Millar argues, has been the over-emphasis on the production of literary work (as opposed to *Sachprosa*), much of it inaccessible to ordinary speakers, and on initiatives in relation to corpus planning, especially orthographic matters, some of which yield results that may appear 'Martian' (p.191). Another proffered reason is the failings of the language planners themselves: Millar comments that 'the level of animosity and dissent produced within the very small community of [Scots] activists is remarkable' (p.197) and that damage has been caused by 'a cadre of language activists whose use of Scots distances them from the usage and experience of native speakers' (p.51).

### *Scottish Affairs*

As a specialist on Scots, Millar has less to say about Gaelic, although the so-called ‘Gaelic renaissance’ of recent years and the greatly increased public provision for the language are best understood in terms similar to those Millar gives for his discussion of Scots, that is, as an expression of changing perceptions of Scotland’s cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. For Millar, Gaelic represents ‘a potent linguistic symbol ... which has, if we are being cynical, the advantage both of *Abstand* status and a geographical heartland which makes it relatively straightforward to be ignored by the great part of the population, except in highly formulaic and token circumstances’. In contrast, he argues that ‘status and acquisition planning for Scots would be much more expensive’ (p.196). This argument is neither entirely novel nor entirely without merit, but it may reflect an obsolescent view of Gaelic as a language of the far north-west. Almost half of today’s Gaelic speakers live in the Lowlands, and public investment in the language has become a Scotland-wide phenomenon. The centre for innovation in Gaelic education is not the Western Isles but Glasgow, where the first all-Gaelic secondary school (building on the first Gaelic primary) has now opened. Given that the large majority of parents who send their children to Gaelic education in the Lowlands do not speak Gaelic themselves, there are no clear limits on the potential growth of Gaelic in the schools, and the language cannot be kept safely in a box. Even so, Millar’s fundamental point is well-taken, that systematic provision for Scots throughout the Scottish education system would require a massive investment of resource and would encounter very significant institutional resistance.

The reasons for that resistance are inherently political, and, as Millar’s study amply demonstrates, inevitably so. Changes to established perceptions with regard to language necessarily implicate fundamental assumptions about the nature of the nation and the polity. Scotland has always been linguistically heterogeneous but that diversity has rarely been reflected in official policy and ideology. There have been some shifts and adjustments, as with the more benevolent (if safely restrained) approach to Gaelic that has developed in recent decades, but the prevailing monoglot ethos remains, it would appear, solidly entrenched.

*June 2006*