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Liberal Nationalism and the Objectivity of National Culture: A Linguistic Relativity-Based Reassessment

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ABSTRACT

This paper articulates the implications of linguistic relativity for liberal nationalism and the objectivity of national culture. The nationalism scholarship of recent decades has been largely characterized by a modernist and constructivist orthodoxy that emphasises the artificial, top-down and socially constructed nature of national culture. This, critics argue, undermines the extent to which it can be considered objective and, by extension, the corresponding degree of objectivity that liberal nationalists ascribe to it. In the normative debate, this has often been used as a basis for invalidating liberal nationalists' arguments for the state promotion of national culture. By contrast, this paper argues that linguistic relativity in fact consolidates the objective dimension to national culture by substantiating the necessary clustering of language, culture and history. As such, the constructivist and modernist-inspired objections to the state promotion of national culture are shown to hinge upon a misleadingly incomplete characterisation of it.

1 | Introduction

The role of national culture in liberal democracies remains a perpetual subject of debate, most recently vis-à-vis Russian expansionism, Chinese authoritarianism, national populism and Western governments' responses to the COVID-19 and migrant crises. Such trends emphasise that the liberal optimism and 'end of history' narratives of the post-Cold War era, which predicted that heightened globalisation would erode national sentiments and fast-track a new era of global convergence proved to be profoundly misplaced. Indeed, the research in political sociology indicates that national attachments remain rife, particularly among the lower-middle and working classes (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Gidron 2022; Gidron and Hall 2020). National culture, therefore, is unlikely to lose its relevance for the foreseeable future, as questions concerning its nature, scope and legitimate functions resurface in virtually every new political and geopolitical context.

A major preoccupation of the recent normative scholarship on nationalism has resultantly been the question of whether the state promotion of national culture is compatible with liberalism. Central to the debate is liberal nationalism, an ideological compound according to which liberalism and nationalism are not only compatible, but are also co-dependent in the sense that national culture is a prerequisite of liberalism's successful political implementation (Miller 1995; Gustavsson and Miller 2020; Tamir 2019; Kymlicka 1995). Since its emergence in its contemporary guise in the 1990s, liberal nationalism's scope has expanded to inform numerous further applied contexts, including populism (Kaul 2020; Daniel 2022), social trust and solidarity (Miller and Ali 2014; Lenard and Miller 2018), democracy (Moore 2003; Tinnenvelt and De Schutter 2009; Auer 2004), religious establishment and heritage (Laborde and Lægaard 2020; Lauwers 2024), immigration (Herr 2023), and language rights/linguistic justice (Kymlicka 1995, Cetrà 2019).

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Take the field of linguistic justice whose arguments for multilingual language policies are almost invariably informed by liberal nationalism; specifically, its conception of national culture, which includes language as part of its definition. Proponents of minority language rights appeal to a 'constitutive' view of language, according to which 'language constitutes who I am' such that 'my language and my identity are inextricably intertwined' (De Schutter 2007, 8). From here, it is supposed that failure to grant minority languages public recognition would undermine the speakers' autonomy (Kymlicka 1995) or 'fair opportunity for self-determination' (Patten 2014, 2019).

This 'constitutive' view of language that proponents of minority language rights refer to in order to defend official language status or equal recognition is based on an assumed link between the minority group's language and its collective cultural identity. That constitutive notion of cultural identity, in turn, was imported from liberal nationalism with its communitarian and 'politics of recognition' assumptions. Kymlicka (1995) and Tamir (1993), for instance, argued that cultures provide a 'context of choice' by delineating meaningful life choices for citizens, while Miller (1995) argued that national culture is a prerequisite of the social cohesion necessary to attaining social justice measures. These liberal nationalist arguments, in turn, fed into the language rights discourse via the works of (Kymlicka 1989, 1995), whose emphasis on language as a significant constituent societal [i.e., sub-state national minority] culture gave these autonomy and justice-based arguments new expressions in the language rights domain. Hence the liberal nationalist conception of culture was carried forward into the linguistic justice discourse in the form of the constitutive view of language.

Such views that appeal to the constitutive function of culture, however, have not been received without criticism, and two immediate questions that arise are: first, just how inextricable is the connection between language and culture? Second, what, more specifically, grounds the link between a people's identity and culture, thereby making the culture constitutive in the first place? These questions are of no minor relevance, since if the constitutive function of language and culture is to be used as a basis for justifying multilingual language policies or the state promotion of national cultures, then there had better be a sound justification available for it. Such a justification, however, is conspicuous in its absence.

Although liberal nationalists do define national/societal culture by citing a disjunction of subjective and objective characteristics,¹ there is insufficient clarity concerning why that culture should be taken to constitute such a central part of people's identities. While they affirm that people typically have a strong attachment to their culture, there is no clarity as to how or why this is so, other than that it is a part of human psychology (Kymlicka 1995, 90), a source of meaning (Tamir 1993, 90), or part of common sense (Miller 1993, 4).² This is problematic, since it leaves them on shaky ground.

Various criticisms have inevitably emerged, emphasising the unwarranted prioritising of national culture (Vincent 1997; Gerson and Rubin 2015), essentialising of culture (Patten 2011; Patten 2014; Moore 2020) and democratic deficit (Gerson and

Rubin 2015). Relatedly, critics within the linguistic justice discourse have further argued for a complete departure from identity-based arguments (A. Rubin 2017), while multiculturalism scholars have recently questioned whether a liberal national identity is even worthy of further consideration (Chin 2021; Uberoi 2020; Modood 2020). Although these further normative questions are beyond the scope of this paper, it should nonetheless be evident that the lack of consensus and clarity among liberal nationalists regarding what grounds the objectivity of national culture and its constitutive functions has knock-on spill-over effects on these related domains.

Against this background, this paper argues that linguistic relativity (i.e., the view that language mirrors its speakers' cultural particularities and influences their cognition accordingly) goes a significant way to redressing this explanatory deficit by highlighting the necessary clustering of language, culture and history, thereby consolidating the objective dimension to national culture. As the most direct, testable, explicitly articulated and empirically substantiated mechanism for the language-culture-identity link, linguistic relativity is the most credible candidate for restating national culture's objectivity in a manner that avoids appealing to caricatured notions of 'primordialism' or 'perennialism'. Further to Anthony D. Smith's ethnosymbolism approach that established that the 'imagined' and 'modernity-induced' character of national identity cannot be understood in isolation from the political exploitation of 'real' and historically-grounded ethnic symbols and traditions, the paper argues that the conception of national culture in question is not 'tacit' or 'arbitrary'. Rather, linguistic relativity underlines its objectivity such that the 'imagined', 'invented' and 'opaque' status that critics assign to it is shown to be a misleadingly incomplete characterisation.

2 | Three Critiques: Unwarranted Prioritising of National Culture, Imaginary National Identity and Essentialism

Scholars familiar with the normative debate on nationalism will recall the so-called 'context of choice' argument, which set much of the stage for liberal nationalism's resurgence. Synoptically: the argument claims that since culture delineates people's range of life choices and 'makes them meaningful to us' (Kymlicka 1995, 83), an attachment to a national/societal culture is therefore a precondition of personal autonomy, which itself requires an intelligible but limited range of choices. Put differently: abundance is harder for us to handle than scarcity, and national culture arguably imposes the optimal limits on our otherwise excessive range of options.³ This argument is part of Kymlicka's justification for the group-differentiated rights of national minorities: it claims that the realisation of autonomy, which is central to liberalism, hinges on a person's access to their culture, since that culture is constitutive of their identity. Different versions of this argument are also advanced by Miller (1995, 85–86) and Tamir (1993, 84); as such, it is central to liberal nationalist political thought.⁴

A common objection to this argument, however, concerns the unwarranted prioritisation of national culture. The role of national culture in providing individuals with 'contexts

of choice' can, it is argued, just as easily be fulfilled by other 'comprehensive cultures', which have nothing to do with nationality. The contexts of choice that liberal nationalists claim to be preconditions of autonomy do not actually need to be national cultures, as defined in the linguistic, historical and territorial sense. Rather, other forms of cultural identification can be equally comprehensive and meaningful to individuals, such as religions, ideologies, or artistic or athletic vocations. Further, there are numerous cultures that do not value individual autonomy (Patten 1999), sometimes to the extent that undermining rather than promoting the culture would be more likely to yield greater autonomy (Kukathas 1992). And finally, there are countless cultural norms that are unsavoury and underserving of respect, let alone political recognition. As Andrew Vincent puts it:

'People may have neuroses, recurring odd fantasies, unpleasant or harmless habits, which may have been communally derived (even from a national culture or historical tradition—like duelling, cannibalism, genital mutilation, racial contempt or infanticide), but surely we would not automatically render them respect simply because they constitute part of an autonomous person?'

(Vincent 1995, 290)

A second, related type of objection concerns the imaginary and somewhat arbitrary nature of national identity, whose state promotion not infrequently results in democratic deficit. Such objections are driven by modernist and constructivist conceptions of national culture (e.g., Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990) according to which national identity is largely an artificial spin-off of nation-building enterprises, fabricated and coercively imposed via assimilationist educational and monolingual policies in order to achieve an otherwise elusive national unity. Nationalism, as Ernest Gellner hyperbolically puts it, 'invents nations where they do not exist' (Gellner 1964, 168), given the necessity for industrialising societies to promote mass literacy and internal migration. National identity, consequently, is often viewed as simply a by-product of modernity, arising from print capitalism and standardised education; developments that escalated the creation of a national consciousness via linguistic assimilation and the dissemination of common narratives.

The idea here is that basing national identity on objective features such as a shared language or culture is misguided. Cultural and linguistic homogeneity (where they exist) within nations is actually the product of nation-building processes that came about via modernisation and mass industrialisation, rather than bottom-up ethno-cultural factors. Therefore, why should the state promote such fabricated interpretations of culture?

A representative example of this objection is advanced by Gerson and Rubin (2015) who claim that, although liberal nationalists acknowledge modernist and constructivist interpretations, this in fact enables them to 'absolve themselves from the charge of setting up a fictional entity as an objective reality ...

[by claiming that their] national cultures are openly imagined and invented' (2015, 201). Nonetheless, they still assign an unwarranted weight to objective features such as language and history.

Further, since the constructivists' works have established that 'nationality has no objective core' (2015, 203), national identity's intangible, invented and imagined character makes it a concept with extremely flexible boundaries, lacking in any 'final, objective definitions' (ibid.). Although liberal nationalists take this to be an advantage because it allows for much internal fluidity, variation, toleration and choice within cultural boundaries, Gerson and Rubin effectively object that this is a cop-out that results in deliberative democratic deficit. For this supposedly tacit and somewhat arbitrary characterisation of national culture makes it immune to scrutiny and deliberation: 'Deliberation [...] exposes the apparently self-evident to external view [...] National culture relies on being partially opaque to such processes.' (2015, 203). Rather than being compatible with liberalism in virtue of its flexibility and inclusivity, then, national culture's elusiveness appears to preclude proper debate, thereby creating serious tension for those who claim that its institutionalisation chimes with liberalism.

A third type of objection to liberal nationalism's notion of culture is that basing culture on objective features such as language and collective history is to 'essentialise' cultural groups (see Phillips 2010; Patten 2011; Patten 2014; Moore 2020). The charge of essentialism, as Margaret Moore puts it, is that using the concept of culture to refer to a group is problematic because 'it suggests that the group is determinate, bounded, and homogenous' (Moore 2020, 189), when in fact it is not. Similarly, Alan Patten claims that 'all of the usual features that are taken to define culture run foul of the problems of internal variation and external overlap: The relevant features are not shared by all and only the members of the [cultural] groups' (Patten 2011, 736). The idea here is that cultures are invariably heterogeneous such that attempting to define them in terms of 'essential' features such as shared language, beliefs or history, is misguided. One can easily imagine, for instance, two adherents of David Icke's conspiracy theories living in Britain and France, who probably have more in common with each other (e.g., a shared worldview) than with most of their own compatriots. As such, to attribute a homogeneous culture to co-nationals based on the language or history would seem unfounded, and a case of essentialising each culture.

Moreover, this charge of essentialising concerns not only language and history, but also behavioural conventions within cultures. For each cultural and behavioural norm, 'there will be several publically established meanings that people enact in their behavior' (Patten 2011, 737). This is problematic in that 'the contours of shared cultures are going to look nothing like the contours of the groups that are typically thought of as cultures' (ibid.), and further, the divergent understandings are such that we are left with no basis for distinguishing different cultures. The problem that such critiques highlight is that accounting for cultures in terms of specific beliefs, values and meanings does not manage to 'track the cultural differences that are commonly supposed to exist' (ibid.) given the sheer extent of the differences within and overlap across cultures.

What these objections highlight is that the continuing lack of clarity among liberal nationalists as to why objective criteria such as language and history should be emphasised in their definitions of culture leaves them susceptible to a myriad of counterexamples and problematic consequences. Against this background, the remainder of this article will bring linguistic relativity to bear on the question of national culture's objectivity, and the implications of this for the normative debate concerning the institutional embodiment of national culture.

3 | Linguistic Relativity and Its Implications for Liberal Nationalism

Linguistic relativity (*alias* Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) is the view that language mirrors its speakers' cultural particularities and influences their cognition accordingly. The fundamental claim is that different languages reflect and influence different culture-specific modes of thinking. Linguistic relativity is based on the premises that (1) there are differences in conceptual repertoires across languages, and (2) the concepts embedded in language influence or determine (semantically related) thought. If these two premises are true, it follows that the speakers' thought processes differ according to which language they speak. The cultural significance of this is, as Thiong'o (1986, 15) puts it: that 'language [...] is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its [...] transmission from one generation to the next'.

The emergence of linguistic relativity as a coherent thesis can be traced back to works of the German Romantics (in particular Herder, Hamann, Fichte and Wilhelm von Humboldt) and was systematically formulated by Herder in his works spanning 1764–1799. Herder was a democratic republican who advocated cultural self-determination for all peoples, and viewed the promotion of historically rooted languages (i.e., the prime vehicle of culture) as a fundamental condition of political legitimacy within nation-states (Patten 2010). Synoptically: he argued that language 'sets limits and contour for all human cognition' (Herder 1767–8), and that every people/nation has its own unique cultural identity (*Volksgeist*) embodied in its language:

Has a nation anything more precious than the language of its fathers? In it dwells its entire world of tradition, history, religion, principles of existence; its whole heart and soul.

(Herder 1891, cited in Berlin 1976, 165).

Although a thorough explanation of the evidence for linguistic relativity is beyond the scope of this paper,⁵ the following synopsis of some of the main evidence for the two premises in question will suffice for present purposes. Regarding the first premise of cross-linguistic variation: it is common knowledge that different languages vary considerably in their conceptual repertoires and lexical/grammatical categories. In translation studies, for instance, the inability achieve exact conceptual equivalence between the source and target language is well-documented. Take the words *cliché* and *Kitsch*, for instance, which are specific to

French and German and are therefore used as direct loans in other languages. Similarly, it is often noted in New Testament scholarship that there are at least three senses of the term *love* in Ancient Greek: *φιλία*, *στοργή* and *ἄστροργος*. While these distinguish between degrees of affection and friendship, using their only English counterpart *love* causes these conceptual nuances to become lost in translation.

In terms of grammar, that different languages grammatically classify different objects into different genders is equally uncontroversial (e.g., *grasshopper* is feminine in French and masculine in Russian). In terms of kinship, whereas English speakers distinguish between relations by both generation and gender, speakers of Hawaiian use the same term for relatives of the same generation and gender; for example, the term used to refer to *father* is also used to refer to the father's brother and the mother's brother (Danesi 2021, 62).

The most rife form of cross-linguistic variation, however, concerns metaphorical and figurative meaning. Since the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), cognitive linguistics has come to view metaphors and figurative meanings as all-pervasive building blocks in language and cognition, and extensive experimental work has examined their prevalence and effects (Danesi 2021). In English, metaphors such as *Achilles' heel*, *Pandora's box* and *Herculean task* activate connotations of Greco-Roman mythology; *an eye for an eye*, *fall from grace* and *apocalyptic* are laden with Biblical connotations, while *winter of discontent*, *faint hearted* and *break the ice* are Shakespearean. In Malagasy, past events are referred to by metaphors such as *taloha* or *teo aloha* (before, in front), while future events as conceived of as after or behind (*aoriana*, any *aoriuna*), which designate different categories of time orientation (Dahl 1995). Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) populations tend to conceive of health and disease in terms of the metaphorical concept of *body as a machine*, while speakers of Tagalog view disease as intertwined and undetachable from the person's overall state of wellbeing (Danesi 2021, 115). It can be seen, then, that different languages are laden with different metaphors, many of which are culture-specific.

The second premise of linguistic relativity, the inextricability of language and thought, is also substantiated by the evidence to date, the most relevant examples of which can be briefly summarised as follows. First, research on the influence of gender on object categorization (such as Phillips and Boroditsky 2003; Cubelli 2011; Samuel et al. 2019; Elpers et al. 2022) suggests that gendered language can prime or induce gender-specific thought. Second, framing effects are well-established: using apparent synonyms with differing connotations affect the way that people conceptualise a given topic by highlighting specific associated semantic domains at the expense of others (Kahnemann 2011; Amsalem and Zoizner 2022). Third, a particularly relevant case study can be found in the work of linguist Daniel Everett on the Amazonian hunter-gatherer Amazonian tribe, the Pirahã. The grammar and lexicon of the Pirahã language lack numerals, quantification, perfect tense, recursion and colour terms (Everett 2005, 25). Consequently, the Pirahã are unable to think in such terms. This is due to an 'immediacy of experience' cultural norm among the Pirahã whereby

surviving and avoiding predators requires an ‘in the moment’ mindset (Everett 2005) that cannot afford to entertain distant historical events. The Pirahã language therefore evidences not only cross-linguistic variation, but also the strong influence of language on cognition.

It can be seen, therefore, that linguistic relativity is substantiated by a wealth of grammatical and empirical evidence, of which the above summary, though it offers only a glimpse, will hopefully have given some idea of its multiple significance. Based on these considerations, moreover, we are now in a position to make the following inference. Language expresses a cultural-linguistic community’s various historically accumulated concepts, and those concepts are intertwined with that community’s cultural norms. Since we think through concepts, our thoughts, which are composed of such concepts, are also intertwined with our cultural-linguistic community’s historically accumulated cultural norms. Hence the necessary clustering of language, culture, and history.

What is the significance of this for liberal nationalism? The first point concerns the objectivity of national culture. Linguistic relativity highlights the necessary clustering of language, culture, and history, such that these can no longer be detached from one another: language embeds the speakers’ objective historically-accumulated culture, and is therefore a prime vehicle of trans-generational cultural continuity. The historical dimension to linguistic relativity in particular drastically increases the degree to which language embeds culture: it is not only present cultural particularities that are embedded in language; it is also the sum total of the surviving concepts and turns of phrase derived from its speakers’ historical pasts.

The second implication of linguistic relativity for liberal nationalism is that it substantiates a de-individualised and communitarian conception of personal identity for the following reasons. It is uncontroversial that the main feature of personal identity is thought. Since language is interwoven with culture, and thought is dependent on and mediated by language, it follows that thought is also interwoven with the culture that one’s language embodies. As such, linguistic relativity substantiates the link between culture and personal identity, which in turn goes a significant way towards explaining what, more specifically, grounds the link between a people’s identity and culture.

Therefore, liberal nationalists’ emphases on the objective features of shared language and history in their definitions of culture is warranted, since language - as linguistic relativity illustrates - is a repository of its speakers’ history and culture. Second, the liberal nationalists’ emphases on the indispensable contribution of national culture to personal identity; and the ‘politics of recognition’-inspired conclusions they draw from this to support the institutionalisation of national culture is not ‘unwarranted’, as several critics have argued. Rather, the necessary clustering of language, culture, and history, highlighted by the impact of language (and by extension culture) on thought and personal identity, collectively establish that national culture (particularly where language figures centrally in its definition) should be assigned greater weight than other cultural attributes.

4 | A Reply From Linguistic Relativity to the Three Charges of Unwarranted Prioritisation of National Culture; Imaginary National Identity; and Essentialising

Recall the first critique examined, which is that liberal nationalists prioritise national culture in an unwarranted manner. This is because there are other comprehensive cultures (such as football fan bases and religions) that have equally important identity-formation functions as national culture, and so it appears arbitrary to prioritise the latter. Now it may be worth noting from the outset that religions and many sports teams mediate national culture in any case. While the sports example is somewhat self-evident (particularly with regard to national teams), the intertwining between religion and national culture is perhaps no less salient, as contemporaneously evidenced by Hindutva nationalism in India and Zionism in Israel. The works of Adrian Hastings and a host of medievalist historians, moreover, have long established the Judaeo-Christian origins of many nations, largely on the grounds that Christianity sanctioned vernacular Biblical and liturgical translations, and provided the ancient Jewish prototype of the nation and sacred lands found in the Old Testament (Hastings 1997).

Considered in light of linguistic relativity, however, it can also be seen that the argument from the unwarranted prioritisation of national culture commits the overlapping fallacies of indifference, inference across categories, and faulty generalisation. That is to say: the argument implicitly assumes that language and history can simply be assigned the same weights as other cultural attributes that are notionally independent of nationality. Upon scrutiny, this assumption turns out to be erroneous, particularly once the relevance of linguistic relativity is taken into consideration. As we have seen, it is implicit in linguistic relativity that, as Thiong’o (1986, 15) puts it, ‘language [...] is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history’. The empirical studies and analytic arguments presented illustrate that language embeds its speakers’ historically-accumulated cultural norms, beliefs, outlooks. Linguistic relativity states that different languages have different conceptual resources, and this influences the speakers’ thoughts/beliefs accordingly. It follows from this that language anchors a people’s cultural continuity: it is the ‘golden thread’ that explains the clustering of language, culture, and history.

The direct reply to the objection from the unwarranted prioritisation of national culture, then, is this. It is simply not true that the language and history that liberal nationalists appeal to are equally relevant to a people’s cultural identity as other cultural attributes that have no relation to nationality. Language (and the history it embeds) is *prior* to other culturally relevant attributes because people necessarily think through its medium in line with the historical lineage it embeds; and this is the prior context within which they form other beliefs and interests that they conceptualise through the medium of that language.

The second critique, advanced by the likes of Gerson and Rubin (2015), claims that the cultural identity that liberal nationalists appeal to is arbitrary and even inconsistent. It seems strange that they accept the modernist and constructivist interpretation of national identity that emphasises its modern,

imagined, and top-down character while simultaneously prioritising language and history in their partly objective definitions of national culture. This, they claim, erroneously attributes a degree of homogeneity and objectivity to national culture. However, there is also an unwarranted assumption in Gerson's and Rubin's argument. That is that the national culture that they appeal to is not just imagined, but also *imaginary*. The erroneous nature of this conflation and the false consequences that emerge from it can be seen clearly when one considers their argument in light of linguistic relativity. If language anchors a people's historical lineage, then even if it is mainly modernisation that explains the emergence of a more explicit awareness of cultural and linguistic unity and homogeneity, this does not emerge from within a vacuum.

Indeed, it is not even true that national culture emerged no later than the American and French Revolutions as though it appeared *ex nihilo*. As the works of Anthony Smith and Adrian Hastings have decisively established: the 'imagined' and 'modernity-induced' character of national identity cannot be understood in isolation from the political exploitation of real and historically grounded ethnic symbols, values, and traditions. Rather, it is more often than not based on pre-existing national sensibilities that track genuine cultural particularities.

Take English national identity, for instance, which is inescapably bound up with institutions and traditions that long pre-date the existence of a modern British state. The common law tradition, which long predates modernity, has been widely 'regarded as one of the distinctive hallmarks of Englishness and as an integral part of English political culture' (Smith 2006, 440) since the 13th century up to the present day. This has been a major contributing factor to the development of modern British Euroscepticism, for instance, in that the bottom-up nature of the common law, which represents the sum-total of judicial precedents arising from over a millennium's worth of real-life cases, is fundamentally incongruent with the top-down Roman law tradition that characterises EU legislation. As such, the binding nature of EU law on British courts has remained a source of tension in that it is seen as a manifestation of the European Commission's encroachment on Britain's 'political and possibly, cultural spheres' (Smith 2006, 435).

Or take contemporary Welsh nationalism that, to this day, regularly draws upon the legacy of Owain Glyndŵr's national rebellion against English subjugation in 1400–1415. Glyndŵr's revolt was sustained by a national vision that sought to restore an independent and unified Wales and to reinstate the native Welsh laws of Hywel Dda, whose codification had already unified most of the country in the 10th century. Ideologically, Glyndŵr's revolt was reinforced by the legitimatist claim that the Welsh should be ruled by the rightful prince of a native population with its own identity, an identity which was frequently referred to by official draftsmen as 'our nation' and 'our homeland' (Davies 1995, 161). Indeed, the revolt and its underlying vision commanded the support of the majority of the Welsh population, and is nothing short of a medieval manifestation of national consciousness.

If it were true that national identity is an exclusively modern invention with 'no objective core', as Gerson and Rubin (2015, 203) put it, it would be impossible to explain contemporary English

Euroscepticism and Welsh separatism partly in terms of such crucial historical influences. These, moreover, are but a few drops in the sea of examples from the Middle Ages that demonstrate that national identity is often based on pre-existing national sensibilities that track genuine cultural particularities. It is also worth emphasising that in the case of many national minority cultures, their drives for political recognition are actually informed by a *resistance* to the assimilation imposed by modern nation-state building. This is precisely because their own indigenous identities existed prior to, and are not constituted by the state-building measures in question: to the contrary, they have been excluded by it.

To summarise the unwarranted nature of this assumption, then: there is a sense in which the likes of Gerson and Rubin have committed the genetic fallacy. That is the supposition that by showing how a belief originated, one has somehow resultantly shown that it is thereby invalidated. Clearly, this does not follow, for it is structurally equivalent to the claim that 'your belief that Chelsea will win the premiership is based on superstition; therefore, Chelsea won't win the premiership'. A glaring *non-sequitur* if there ever was one.

The third objection of essentialising claims that there is so much internal variation and external overlap within and across cultures that claiming, as liberal nationalists do, that they tend to be based on a shared language or history is simply a case of essentialising. What about members of such cultures who do not view their language or history as relevant? Moreover, the sheer variation in what members view as relevant to their identity and in their behavioural conventions is so heterogeneous and overlaps so much with other cultures that claiming that they are based on such straightforwardly objective attributes as language or history would be to essentialise them.

However, a consideration of linguistic relativity reveals that, from the fact that not everyone sees themselves as being largely defined by their language and history, it does not follow that they are right about it. To see how this is so, we need to briefly revisit the consequences of linguistic relativity. Linguistic relativity has it that the historically accumulated and communally derived conceptual resources embedded in a language influence the speakers' thoughts in line with them. This means that the most fundamental and prior part of people's personal identities (i.e., thought) is also permeated with those cultural particularities, since they think through the concepts embedded in their language. Again, this provides the prior context within which people develop other beliefs and practices that they view as relevant to their cultural identity. However, these are secondary in comparison with language (and the historical lineage it embeds).

The objectivity that liberal nationalists ascribe to culture, then, appears to be accurate when considered in light of the implications of linguistic relativity articulated above. Defining national cultures partly in terms of such objective criteria as language allows for enough internal homogeneity and coherence while simultaneously conceding the fact of internal variation and external overlap. If it were true that language could be weighted equally to other cultural criteria, then liberal nationalism would indeed run into the problem of essentialising. In such a situation, language would only be one among an indeterminately

large disjunction of other criteria, and as such, its prioritisation would indeed be arbitrary. However, linguistic relativity, as I have argued, demonstrates that language is typically prior to other cultural criteria in that it embeds the speakers' historically accumulated concepts and cultural particularities, thereby showing that language, culture, and history are not detachable from one another as singular possible but not central constituents of culture.

5 | Implications for the Social Lineage Account of Culture

Returning to the question of linguistic relativity's implications for the third critique (i.e., the objection from essentialising), what further considerations can be brought to bear on the debate? This topic is of particular relevance since, not only does the 'essentialising' objection continue to resurface in the contemporary debate on liberal nationalism (e.g., Moore 2020); it has also given rise to the influential 'social lineage' replacement view of culture, formulated by Patten (2011, 2014) as a response to the charge of essentialising. Rather than explicitly basing culture on shared language, beliefs or sustained territorial occupation, Patten proposes a 'non-essentialist' view that stresses social lineage and intergenerational socialisation. On this view, culture is constituted by 'an unbroken chain of intergenerational transmission' (Patten 2014, 50) in the sense that 'one generation of a culture is controlling the socialization of a new generation or group of newcomers', subjecting those newcomers to a common formative context (ibid.). This does not require a distinctive language or any particular set of beliefs or practices; rather, it simply requires a traceable lineage of intergenerational cultural continuity, brought about by being socialised within a formative institutional framework such as educational, legal or familial structures.

Although this account advantageously acknowledges the varied processes that contribute to the formative frameworks which sustain the longevity of cultures while simultaneously avoiding essentialism, a consideration of linguistic relativity does cast doubt on just how relevant its *raison d'être*—namely, avoiding essentialism while nonetheless remaining informative—really is. For, as mentioned, the implications of linguistic relativity reveal that the prioritisation of language over other cultural attributes does not actually result in the error of 'essentialising' in the first place. While it may be true that some members of cultures who do share a distinctive language do not see that language as central to their identity, it does not follow that they are right about it. The fact is that linguistic relativity shows that language (which embeds culture and historical lineage) influences people's thought processes in line with their linguistic community's cultural particularities; and it cannot be denied that this is central to their identity because thought is the main feature of personal identity.

It might be objected that there are many national cultures where language is not in fact central to their identity: for instance, cultures whose main language is a *lingua franca*. Take America or Australia, for instance, whose main de facto official language is English; yet, it would be inaccurate to suggest that they therefore share the same cultural identity simply by virtue of

speaking English. Indeed, the fact that English is the dominant language across the entire Anglosphere would seem to suggest that English is hardly relevant at all to the national identities in question. From this, it might be concluded that Patten is right to suppose that basing a definition of culture on language is unrealistic and an instance of essentialising.

There are two replies to be made here. The first concerns the individuation of languages. It is often the case that what is formally recognised as a single language is in fact an umbrella category for a constellation of different speech varieties that vary in their degrees of mutual [un]intelligibility. For instance, Arabic is formally recognised as a single language; yet such is the degree of cross-regional variation across Arabic dialects that they are often mutually unintelligible. Conversely: Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian are mutually intelligible and were not even considered as separate languages until the breakup of Yugoslavia; rather, they were all classified as Serbo-Croatian (Joseph 2020). Thus the categorization of different speech varieties into either dialects or distinctive formally recognised languages is often arbitrary and based on political rather than linguistic criteria. It is somewhat misleading, therefore, to attribute outright linguistic homogeneity across the Anglosphere: this overlooks the fact that English has been repeatedly remoulded and domesticated across different cultural contexts into several different culture-specific speech varieties.

The second reply concerns Wittgenstein's (1953) family resemblance definition (*alias* cluster concept) that involves characterising a concept in terms of a disjunctive set of criteria, only a weighted number of which need to be satisfied to identify the target phenomenon. This enables us to acknowledge that the concept of national culture does not have sharp boundaries in the first place. Thus although language is part of every national culture, its relevance will be weighted differently across different nations, according to whether the language is indigenous, culture-specific or a *lingua franca*. Further, although *linguae francae* are relevant to the extent that they have been domesticated so as to partly embody the host nation's culture, the relevance can nonetheless be somewhat limited due to varying degrees of culture-specificity and historical rootedness. Icelandic or Welsh, for instance, are clearly more relevant to the national cultures of Iceland and Wales than Australian English is to the Australian identity, simply because they are culture-specific, indigenous, and have been spoken as native languages for a vaster length of time, thereby embodying a greater degree of cultural heritage.

Does this still leave us with the problem that Patten (2014) identified; namely that we are left with no basis for distinguishing different cultures? And, *a fortiori*, does the family resemblance approach—which avoids the charge of essentialising—allow for so much flexibility and divergent understandings as to what features are most relevant to a national culture that we are simply taken back to square one, as it were, in being unable to account for the persistence of cultures over time, given that the relevant features are subject to change, as indeed Moore (2020) has recently emphasised?

Not as such. Part of the significance of Wittgenstein's family resemblance definition is that there is no *need* to define things in

homogenous, generalised terms in most cases in the first place. The fact is that we can all point to examples of most concepts without being able to provide definitions; and the concept of national culture is no different in this respect (how else would Patten be able to claim that ‘the contours of shared cultures are going to look nothing like the contours of the groups that are typically thought of as cultures’ (2011, 737) before proposing his own definition, if he did not already understand the concept?). Indeed, it is against the background of this ‘craving for generality’ that Wittgenstein advanced the family resemblance model (1953: §66).

By way of clarification, then: what this paper has thus far argued is that language needs to be taken much more seriously and assigned greater weight in accounts of cultural identity/national culture; though this is not for the sake of providing a rigid definition, not least since doing so is usually superfluous. Rather, it is for the sake of highlighting the necessary clustering of language, culture, and history—as illustrated by linguistic relativity—in order to (1) consolidate the objective dimension to national identities; and (2) justify and clarify the nature and relevance of the constitutive function of culture.

Acknowledging the fact of linguistic relativity, then, together with the fact that definitions are not usually exclusive or exhaustive in the first place, removes the problem of ‘essentialising’ that Patten’s social lineage account consciously avoids. There is no such mistake as ‘essentialising’ committed by emphasising language as a major constituent of national culture, as Kymlicka and other liberal nationalists do. As linguistic relativity illustrates, language is usually central to cultural and personal identity; and where a given culture does not have a *strictly* distinctive language associated with it, this can be accounted for in terms of the family resemblance definition, which allows for differences in relative weightings and exceptions to the rule.

6 | Two Further Objections to the Use of Linguistic Relativity as an Explanatory Link

Since this paper has advanced what may be viewed as unconventionally strong claims about the extent to which language carries its speakers’ cultural heritage, it is worth considering some further objections that may constitute major obstacles to accepting this view. The first concerns multilingual nations: if language is supposed to be assigned such significant weight in liberal nationalists’ accounts of national culture, how would this work in nations whose cultural/political identities are not built around a single language, such as Switzerland, Belgium or India, to name a few? Take the Belgian cultural identity, for instance: over a half of Belgians are native Dutch speakers while over a third are native French speakers. Yet if language is central to the Belgian cultural identity, which language should take precedence? Since French and Dutch reflect different cultures on the linguistic relativity view, it would seem arbitrary, at the very least, to associate one but not the other with Belgian national culture.

The most straightforward answer to this objection is that, since Belgium is a multinational state territorially and ethno-linguistically divided into Flanders and Wallonia (and Brussels), Belgian national culture is an umbrella category encompassing

both the Dutch/Flemish and French/Walloon identities. This is not to suggest that the overarching Belgian identity is purely ‘civic’, given that Belgians share nearly two centuries’ worth of history and legacy of Catholic tradition, for instance. However, there is a strong sense in which Flanders and Wallonia remain two distinct nations marked by entrenched cultural-linguistic divides and growing support for Flemish separatism, as evidenced a continued surge in support for *Vlaams Belang* and *N-VA*, which are currently polling at 25.7% and 25.5%, respectively, having topped the polls at the 2024 federal election.⁶ There is also a noteworthy growing cultural divide between both regions in terms of political ideology, with an increasing share of Walloon voters drifting to the political left while Flemish voters are drifting increasingly to the right (Dodeigne and Renard 2018; Niessen et al. 2022).

Linguistic relativity consolidates the case for classifying Flanders and Wallonia as two different nations with different national cultures; however, it does not deny that Belgian identity constitutes an overarching and overlapping nation-state culture. Although the Belgian nation-state culture may be less ‘thick’ than the Flemish and Walloon identities it encompasses, this is perfectly compatible with the fact that it may be viewed by many as an overarching superordinate identity category within a ‘nested identity’ system. In the case of Flanders: although surveys indicate that ~30% of Flemish people view themselves as primarily or exclusively Flemish, only ~27% view themselves as primarily or exclusively Belgian (Brigevich 2016). Only ~6% and ~12% view themselves as exclusively Flemish or Belgian, respectively (ibid.).

This suggests that most Flemish people view themselves as both Flemish and Belgian within a nested identity structure, where the overarching category of Belgian identity is mediated through the underlying Flemish identity. The same applies *mutatis mutandis* to other multinational states where the overarching nation-state culture often interacts with, or is mediated by, an underlying sub-state or cultural minority identity. Although the question of which identity takes precedence varies on a case-by-case basis (depending on one’s social and linguistic networks, cross-cultural interaction or isolation, civic and political participation, historical and cultural awareness etc.), the point nonetheless stands regardless of how multilingual a given nation is. Take India: despite having over 400 languages, the country’s public culture of secularism, political equality, democracy and (not entirely uncontentiously) widespread Hindu identification nonetheless serves as a source of overarching national unity among Gujarati, Punjabi, Tamil, Malayalam and speakers alike. Linguistic relativity does not deny the possibility or existence of nested identities; rather, it simply emphasises the salience and significance of language within such multiple-identity structures.

The second objection to using linguistic relativity as an explanatory link is the problem of explanatory overreach or overtermination. That is: if linguistic relativity applies to speech varieties that are only classified as dialects (e.g., Australian English or Quebecois French), does this not open the flood gates to an indefinite number of finer-grained instances of it, such as the in-group slang or jargon used in football support bases or industry? In other words: if linguistic relativity can be applied

across an indefinite number of cultural groups that have no relation to nationality as such, then how is it supposed to specifically consolidate the liberal nationalist notion of national culture, and their argument that its state promotion should be prioritised over other, non-national instances of culture?

Here, it must be emphasised that the degree to which languages carry their speakers' culture dwarfs the degree to which the same may be true of the in-group slang or jargon of football fan bases or industry. Since languages stretch back for centuries or millennia, the extent to which they embed their speakers' culture is disproportionately greater than the extent to which this may happen within football fan bases. Furthermore, the range of cultural heritage that language embeds is vastly more comprehensive than that of subcultures or interest groups whose connection with national identity is trivial at best. As Kymlicka puts it: national ['societal'] culture 'provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, educational religious, recreational and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres' (1995, 76).

The same cannot be generalised across other forms of culture, which are by definition significantly less comprehensive. While there are clearly some part-exceptions to the rule here, such as devout religious practice, these invariably occur within the wider context of the language, which itself provides the prior conceptual framework through which the religious worship etc. takes place. Thus the use of linguistic relativity for (1) consolidating national culture's objective dimensions of language and history, and (2) explaining the constitutive function of culture is not undermined by the charge of overreach. For, as mentioned, the degree to which language embeds national culture significantly outweighs the degree to which it embeds other forms of culture that have little if anything to do with nationality or ethnicity.

7 | Conclusion

The viability of liberal nationalists' account of national culture, which continues to inform numerous debates on the place of national identity in liberal democracies, largely hinges on the truth of linguistic relativity. For if it were false that language embeds its speakers' culture and influences their cognition accordingly, it would be hard to see why the objective features of language and history should be given such emphasis among a potentially indefinite disjunction of other cultural criteria. In such a case, liberal nationalists' arguments for the political recognition and state promotion of national minority/majority cultures, made on the basis that national culture is a necessary precondition of autonomy or justice, would remain on shaky grounds and susceptible to the numerous objections examined in this paper.

However, acknowledging the relevance of linguistic relativity results in the following advantages. First, the fact that linguistic relativity substantiates the necessary clustering of language, culture, and history goes a significant way to explaining the objectivity and constitutive function of national culture. This, in turn, can be used to pull the carpet from underneath the arguments whose objections of deliberative democratic deficit and

the unwarranted prioritising of national culture hinge on an unreformed constructivist and modernist account of national identity formation. Second, it explains why language should be assigned greater weight than other identity goods in the normative literature on the institutionalisation of cultural and national identity, since it specifies the mechanism whereby language, culture, and history are interconnected, thereby providing the prior context within which subcultures and other forms of identification that transcend national boundaries emerge.

Finally, there is also the question of historical and empirical relevance. It is arguably no accident that linguistic relativity as a coherent thesis was first formulated by J.G. Herder, who can reasonably be credited with being the chief founder of nationalist political thought. Linguistic relativity also formed the basis of J.G. Fichte's (1808) programme of cultural nationalism that, in an almost identical vein to Miller (1995, 90–99), claims that national attachments are necessary preconditions of the social trust and solidarity needed for the proper functioning of the nation-state (Fichte 1808). Further, most nationalist and anticolonial movements of the 19th and 20th centuries were strongly associated with language *qua* a vehicle of culture,⁷ and the central 'language standardisation' dimension to both Renaissance humanism and Modernity was equally informed by this principle (Nauta 2006; Patten 2006; Jaspers and Absillis 2016). It is somewhat regrettable, therefore, that its relevance in the contemporary debate continues to be underacknowledged. While it would be unwarranted to accuse liberal nationalists of reinventing the historical wheel, a renewed focus on the cultural-linguistic link would not go amiss.

Endnotes

¹ According to Kymlicka (1995, 18), a societal [=national minority] culture is an 'intergenerational community, more or less institutionally complete, occupying a given territory or homeland, sharing a distinct language and history'. According to Miller (1995) and Tamir (1993), national culture is a cluster concept encompassing shared beliefs and experiences of history, belonging, language, and social conceptions (Miller 1995), and national consciousness, history, language, religion, and territory (Tamir 1993, 65–74).

² An analogous unclarity is found in the language rights literature regarding the link between language and cultural identity. Stephen May, for instance, claims that although there is no inevitable correspondence between language and identity, historical events such as the Bengali language movement suggests that such a correspondence often does exist (May 2015, 137). Van Parijs, despite using this link as a basis for justifying his central 'parity of esteem' principle, simply claims that any respect owed to languages is derivative of a prior respect owed to individuals 'who happen to have that language as an important component of their collective identity' (Van Parijs 2011, 146). In neither case is there any explanation as to what, if anything, substantiates this culture/identity link.

³ For an interesting account of how our choices are insufficiently limited due to the acceleration of technological, social and cultural changes, see Rosa (2013), who argues that since the industrial revolution, the explosion of choice has left us feeling fundamentally unsatisfied and under-optimised.

⁴ Indeed, some have gone so far as to label this *the* liberal nationalist argument, such as Patten (1999).

⁵ For some recent accessible yet comprehensive overviews of linguistic relativity, see Danesi (2021) and Everett (2023).

⁶ Polling by Het Laatste Nieuws, VTM NIEUWS, RTL and Le Soir, March 2025. See: <https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/1487649/vlaams-belang-tops-new-poll-open-vld-at-historical-low>.

⁷ Examples include, though are by no means limited to: Norway, Ireland, Iceland, India, Italy, Greece, Romania, Sweden, Hungary, Wales, Poland, Bulgaria, Albania, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Bangladesh, Lithuania, Turkey, Flanders, Philippines, Israel and so on.

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