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**Realist Social Theory and Multilingualism in Europe**

**Abstract**

This paper outlines a theoretical approach to multilingualism in Europe that draws on recent work in realist social theory (RST). It sets out the key concepts of culture, structure and agency, and develops a view of language as a cultural emergent property - that is, as an outcome of the dynamic interplay between these ontological components of the world. The paper provides an indication of the relevance of these ideas for language policy and planning in Europe and explores the methodological implications of our particular account of RST. It also provides an introduction to the subsequent papers, which discuss empirical examples of various European contexts where multilingualism is a feature.

**Keywords**

Archer, realist social theory, multilingualism, language policy

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag entwirft einen Ansatz zur Analyse von Mehrsprachigkeit in Europa im Licht neuer Entwicklungen der Realist Social Theory (RST). Er bestimmt die Kernbegriffe *Kultur*, *Struktur* und *Handeln* und zeigt Sprache als emergentes Ergebnis des dynamischen Zusammenspiels dieser ontologischen Grundgrößen der Welt. Deutlich werden die Bedeutung eines solchen Ansatzes für die Sprachenpolitik und -planung in Europa; deutlich wird aber auch, was ein RST-Ansatz methodologisch voraussetzt. Schließlich führt der Beitrag in die weiteren Beiträge des Hefts ein, die Fallstudien von Mehrsprachigkeit in Europa aus dem Blickwinkel von RST diskutieren.

Résumé: Cet article propose une approche théorique du plurilinguisme en Europe qui se base sur les développements récents de la Théorie sociale réaliste (TSR). Il définit les concepts majeurs de culture, de structure et d'agentivité et affirme une conception du langage comme propriété culturelle émergente, c'est-à-dire comme le résultat de la dynamique dialectique articulant ces dimensions ontologiques (i.e. culture, structure et agentivité). A ce titre, l'article milite en faveur de la pertinence cette perspective pour les politiques linguistiques et leur planification en Europe au même titre qu'il en questionne les implications méthodologiques pour la TSR. Enfin, il fait office de cadre introductif aux autres articles plus axés sur des études de cas de différents contextes européens dans lesquels le plurilinguisme joue un rôle.

**1. Introducing realist social theory**

In this introductory paper, we outline a theoretical approach to multilingualism that draws on recent work in realist social theory. Our aim is to explore why it may be that policies devised within Europe that are aimed at installing a broader tolerance for multilingualism, or to ensure that more languages can be used in certain situations, seem unable to inhibit either the spread of English as a lingua franca, or the growing nationalisms that insist on tying national identity to use of the 'national language'. Our suggestion, in this largely theoretical opening piece, is that the assumptions underlying many kinds of policy initiative warrant greater investigation, and that the conceptual toolkit that realist social theory makes available has a potentially substantial contribution to make. We begin with some observations about the relevance of social theory to language policy before

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setting out the key features of a realist perspective and presenting a consideration of the sense(s) in which it is meaningful to refer to different 'languages', from within a realist framework. We then discuss the concepts culture, structure and agency, before concluding with a summary of what we take to be the methodological implications of our theoretical position. Subsequent contributions to this volume explore these issues with reference to various empirical examples.

The immediate concerns with which politicians have to grapple include the many challenges attendant on language policy and planning (for summaries and examples see Cooper 1989; Johnson 2013; Ricento 2006; Spolsky 2004; Tollefson 1991; Wright 1994), including matters such as: the cost of translating legislation or advice into the many languages spoken by members of their electorate; or the optimal way to staff schools with a responsibility for educating the pupils from migrant families when the teachers available speak only the language that is dominant in the locality; or how to respond to signs of conflict and division such as increases in violent attacks on citizens identified as 'foreign'. As earlier commentators have noted, '... policies often create and sustain various forms of social inequality, and ... policymakers usually promote the interests of dominant social groups,' (Tollefson 2006: 42). Even when this is not the case, those under pressure to make such decisions are unlikely to concern themselves with philosophical questions such as 'what is (a) "language"?' or 'what precisely is the relationship between "language" and "ethnicity"?' This is quite understandable, but as Paulston and Heidemann (2006) point out: '... no language policy is likely to be successful in the long run if it goes counter to the existing sociocultural forces acting on the local contextual situations' (p.298). As long ago as 1989, Cooper made the point that 'To plan language is to plan society. A satisfactory theory of language planning, therefore, awaits a satisfactory theory of social change' (Cooper 1989 p.182).

It is our contention moreover that a failure to engage with ontological questions (such as what the terms 'language' and 'languages' may denote), epistemological questions (such as how we can access knowledge of languages, 'ethnic' identities, nationalism etc.), and methodological questions (such as how empirical research can produce valid knowledge that is also useful to practitioners), is likely to lead to failures in policies and practices. That this is so is demonstrated time and again when policy makers, for whatever reason (be it time, career path, party loyalty etc.) bypass the ontological, epistemological and methodological dimensions of a problem in favour of a conceptualisation that seems likely to be more popular. Witness the disregarding of ideologically unwelcome economic advice ahead of the financial crash in 2008, or of that from scholars of criminology about how to reduce recidivism (e.g. Hodgson 2009; Pawson 2002a, 2002b), not to mention the continuing threat to the planet as politicians resist responding to the evidence-based warnings of scientists about the impending devastation from human-induced climate change (e.g. Eastina et al. 2011; McCright 2011).

In this paper, we set out some core concepts that we believe are essential for understanding the challenges faced by individuals, communities, societies and states in the European region, in relation to categories of people and of languages. We are the first to acknowledge that many others have engaged with similar issues, from a range of perspectives, over many years (e.g. Baldauf and Kaplan 2005, 2006; Coulmas 1991; Extra and Gorter 2001; Franceschini 2009; Grin 2003; Hogan-Brun and Wolff 2003; Mar-Molinero and Stevenson 2006; Unger, Krzyzanowski and Wodak 2014). However, in this paper we focus on the ideas associated with realist social theory, and subsequent contributors to this collection of papers respond from the standpoints of their own expertise and experience – in different regions of Europe and in relation to a range of linguistic contexts.

Realist social theory (hereafter RST) is a term coined by Archer (1995), and refers to a growing body of work by philosophers and social scientists, such as, amongst others, Archer et al. (2013), Bhaskar (1998), Byrne (2011), Carter (2000) Elder-Vass (2012), Layder (1997, 1998), Sayer (1992, 2000, 2012).

RST rests on an ontological commitment to the claim ‘that the world exists, and is what it is largely independently of particular observers’ (Sayer 2004: 1778). As a post-positivist philosophy, realism acknowledges that ‘[t]he real includes knowledge and discourses (in a broad sense) and is affected by actions influenced by such ideational phenomena’ (ibid.). Reality comprises many different sorts of things, with different sorts of properties which permit different sorts of relations. (We relate differently to other human beings, to machines, to vegetables and to non-human animals – and the ways we relate are shaped by their properties, which is why eat spinach but not light-bulbs, and why we neither marry computers nor program cats.) RST, then, adopts a variegated view of the social world (see Layder 2004; 2006), one that regards it as consisting of material forces, technologies and people. Interactions amongst these generate consequences that, over time, give rise to structured patterns of relations. These social relations, of varying persistence and durability (some are fleeting, some become more embedded), are therefore described as ‘emergent’. Thus, these structured social relations are necessarily anterior to social action; that is, people are always located in determinate, historical conditions and therefore act in circumstances that are partly not of their own choosing. In addition, these emergent social relations, by virtue of being emergent, have their own causal influence and efficacy. In the sense used here, emergent relations are also irreducible – e.g. institutions such as ‘the university’ or ‘the law’ are more than the aggregate of the individuals and material milieux that make them up, partly because of the ways in which people, practices and materials are interconnected. Furthermore, we all encounter pre-existing configurations of cultural forms such as language, into which we are socialized and to which we contribute.

The realist model of social explanation distinguishes analytically between agency, structure and culture, recognizing that each of them has its distinctive properties and powers, each is irreducible to any of the others, and each develops its own emergent properties and powers specific to it. Social theory is concerned with the relationship between social relations and social action, or between social change and social stability - or between structure and agency (see, for example, Callinicos 2004; Elder-Vass 2010, Giddens 1979, Hays 1994, Kabele 2010, López and Scott 2000). The key distinction here is between people and social relations: people act, they have intentionality and purpose; social relations have none of these properties, but they are durable and ‘exert systematic causal effects on subsequent action’ (Archer 1995: 167). It follows from this that ‘social realism implies a methodology based upon analytical dualism, where explanation of why things social are so and not otherwise depends upon an account of how the properties and powers of the “people” causally intertwine with those of the “parts”,’ (Archer 1995: 15). Structural relations are primarily dependent on material resources whereas cultural relations are primarily ideational.

In much of the discourse about the rapid changes taking place across the globe (environmental and climate change; technological and economic change; and patterns of migration, often in response to these other changes), the labels applied to ‘people’ conceal presuppositions about the appropriate criteria by which they may be classified. Blommaert and Rampton (2011: 1) draw attention to the inadequacy of some conventional categories for accounting for current realities:

[T]he multiculturalism of an earlier era (captured, mostly, in an ‘ethnic minorities’ paradigm) has been gradually replaced by what Vertovec (2007) calls ‘super-diversity’. Super-diversity is characterized by a tremendous increase in the categories of migrants, not only in terms of nationality, ethnicity, language, and religion, but also in terms of motives, patterns and itineraries of migration, processes of insertion into the labour and housing markets of the host societies, and so on.

We find much to agree with in this paper, which provides an excellent account of what is meant by ‘superdiversity’ and the challenges it offers to existing practices and the thinking underlying policy-making. The authors highlight the fact that ‘the factuality of named languages continues to be taken

for granted in a great deal of contemporary institutional policy and practice' (ibid.: 4), and align themselves with critics of the 'idea of distinct "languages"', preferring instead to emphasise the choices speakers make as they form and maintain 'communities of practice' and 'networks'.

## **2. A variegated ontology**

However, from a realist perspective, we would want to draw out further some ontological distinctions between these various categories (i.e. 'nationality, ethnicity, language, and religion ... motives, patterns and itineraries of migration, processes of insertion into the labour and housing markets of the host societies'). We see in this list things which are not all of like kind, and we propose that paying attention to their contrasting properties, powers and propensities makes it possible to investigate and describe practices and outcomes in ways that are potentially of greater use to policy-makers than the routinely used conventional labels.

We also draw a distinction between the 'commonsense' concepts and terms that people use to label the varieties they speak and the groups to which they belong, which are, we agree, legitimate '*objects of analysis*' (ibid.: 5, italics in original), and the more theorised categories deployed by researchers in explanations of patterns and outcomes. This is not always easily accomplished, however. As Blommaert and Rampton point out, 'even in sociolinguistic work that sets out to challenge nation-state monolingualism, languages are sometimes still conceptualized as bounded systems linked with bounded communities' (ibid.: 4), and if we wish to communicate *about* communication, it is very difficult to find terminology that does not imply the 'bounded system linked with bounded community' connotations of 'language'.

## **3. A realist perspective on language**

We start by acknowledging the material, practical origins of language. Human beings are physical entities capable of producing and receiving sounds using the material, biological resources of their vocal and aural affordances – while non-hearing people use the visual channel to equivalent ends. '[L]inguistic form arises from interactions between the shape of the body, cognitive processing, and the nature of social interaction across a wide variety of timescales' (MacWhinney 2006: 732). The configurations into which the manipulation of sounds (and gestures) have developed for symbolic communication take many forms, with further layers of variation added as writing and other media have developed in addition to speech, generating the highly complex forms of communication that are available to human beings. However, as has been well documented for many decades (notwithstanding some challenges, e.g. Sampson 1997, Evans & Levinson 2009), these variations mask a number of features that are found in all variants of human languages (e.g. the universal presence of symbolic signs for things and processes, classified as nouns and verbs).

From an RST perspective, languages are cultural emergent properties; (see Sealey and Carter 2004 for an extended discussion of this notion). That is, the inherited, material potential for symbolic communication is deployed in interactions among many people, across long timescales, developing, as this happens, in different contexts, further properties and potentials. A variegated ontology accommodates the common properties of human languages, no doubt deriving from humans' biological inheritance, as well as the empirically observable differences in linguistic forms. Thus, we do not need to reify 'languages' as though they are static, free-standing entities, to recognise that, experientially, we often – particularly when we travel – encounter people 'speaking a language' that is incomprehensible to us. Linguists can point out how, analytically, an utterance produced by a speaker of that language is structurally similar to one we might produce ourselves, and can provide evidence of commonalities shared by phonological, morphological and syntactic patterns across all human language forms.

To elaborate: a distinction, for example, between 'Italian' and 'English' is meaningful at an empirical level, as when one participant in a meeting might say 'I didn't understand what the two delegates just said as I don't speak Italian.' For such purposes, the extent of, and limits to, the range of utterances that could uncontroversially be classified as 'English' or 'Italian' are not at issue. Nor is it necessary for those involved to be aware of the possibility that, as humanly produced resources, both languages are linked in unobservable ways. That is, characteristics of both may be traced historically to earlier configurations of linguistic patterns that are evident in Latin. Other aspects, too, are not immediately relevant to this situation, such as the fact that all these speakers were born with a capacity to converse in any human language, and that the varieties they can actually deploy are a product of the contingent circumstances into which they were born and raised (this bit of the globe rather than that, at this point in history and not an earlier or later one). And, for the purposes of this socially situated activity, the speakers are unlikely to be troubled by the many and complex processes by which the cumulative contributions of many speakers, over many years, have been not only produced and used for communication, but reflected on, recorded and evaluated by those with the power to do so. These processes lead to the valorising, within the realisation of each 'language', some accents, vocabulary and grammar and the stigmatising of others, so that what 'counts' as 'English' or 'Italian' is normatively reinforced to include some variants and exclude others; (participants in an international meeting would be under normative pressure not to use – nor perhaps even to name as 'their language' - the Scouse or Bavarian dialects, for example, as opposed to standard English or German).

This variegated ontology also helps to explain how 'languages', as emergent properties that are not reducible to their component parts, become 'artifactualised' (Blommaert 2006), as people with different goals and objectives seek to promote ideas about 'standard', 'correct' or 'national' variants, and about the inherent superiority of these.

The emergent capacities of language as a cultural resource include their causal power to 'act back' on speakers. What can be said and recognized as intelligible by other speakers shapes, enables and also partly constrains what any speaker can say, so that one may invoke associations and connotations without having chosen to do so, simply because of the cumulative configurations of language as used by many speakers (and writers) over many repetitions (Hoey 2005, Louw 1996, Pace-Sigg 2013). Furthermore, speakers constantly strain to produce the meanings they intend, while situated in contexts that are not of their choosing. There is thus a creative tension between speakers' meanings, which derive from: on the one hand, their goals, projects and interests, and their interactions with others, as they negotiate social networks and communities of practice; and, on the other hand, the structured relations that place people differently in terms of access to goods and resources.

#### **4. A realist perspective on culture**

Like 'language', 'culture' is used loosely and variously in everyday discourse and in policy documents. Williams (1985: 87) identifies culture as 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language', and Archer (1988: 1) observes that it 'has displayed the weakest analytical development of any key concept in sociology and it has played the most wildly vacillating role within sociological theory'. In a recent call for research projects to be funded by the European Union, 'culture' occurs in contexts such as this: 'research on language as instrument [*sic*] of political power, which might lead to the disappearance of regional or minority languages and cultures, or in the contrary to their proliferation' (European Commission 2013). This kind of formulation reifies both 'language' and 'culture', implying that these are entities to be counted and regulated. The experience that constitutes the cultural domain, common to all human beings, is obscured in the conventional discourse, which routinely represents cultures as collections of difference. Such approaches also risk diverting attention from structured inequalities, if groups of people are

classified according to the 'culture' with which they are associated rather than with respect to their location in relation to the distribution of resources and opportunities. That is, the unequal distributions of goods, resources and wealth are sustained and reproduced, such that it is much more likely that a child born into an affluent family will become an affluent adult and parent than will a child born into poverty.

The way that structural inequalities are often overlooked when the emphasis is placed on 'multiculturalism' is explored in a commentary on Williams' *Culture and Society*:

[T]he idea of culture plays its own contradictory part in the working out of multiculturalism. The idea ... valorizes difference at the expense of inter-cultural commonalities. Whatever the biographical reality (individual or collective) of our formation, what counts as culture is what distinguishes us from others with whom we may in reality share as much if not more. The kind of difference that counts is custom: confirmed, received difference. It is for this reason that the multiculturalist appeal to diversity has the paradoxical effect of promoting customary stereotypes even as it deplores their negative effects.

Mulhern (2009: 42)

As was argued above in relation to 'language', the concept of a variegated ontology accommodates both surface-level, empirical phenomena and realities that are less apparent. Thus social actors may contrast the way they conduct themselves with the way some other people do – that is, their 'customs' – including, for example, how, respectively, they and members of some other social group dress, relate to their children, parents or neighbours, (fail to) observe religious strictures etc. These observable behaviours are 'the stuff of Socio-Cultural interaction,' or what Archer (1988: vxii) terms 'Socio-Cultural life'. People in all societies meet their needs with variants of patterned behaviours, and this surface variation may mask what all societies share in common – the need to confront and respond to existing configurations of competing interests in contexts of cultural conditioning. 'Culture' here is used in its second sense within RST, as the 'Cultural System', which comprises the products of human consciousness and reflection, consisting of interlinked propositions.

Archer's impressive work elaborates in detail the various possibilities for stability and change in both of these – analytically separable – components of culture. Of interest here are just some key precepts, including the following.

The Cultural System is the product of Socio-Cultural interactions across historical time. It is made up of theories, beliefs, values and arguments, and there are objective relations among these formulations. The 'Cultural System' thus refers to relations that obtain between the components of culture - that is, intelligibilia which stand in logical relations to one another. In this sense, conflicting propositions are incompatible. So, for example, the claim that smoking tobacco increases one's risk of contracting various diseases stands in opposition to the claim that smoking is harmless. An individual cannot believe both these propositions, so at this level of the Cultural System, the ideas themselves have properties – such as mutual incommensurability – that are not reducible to the people who hold them and what they do in the light of their beliefs. Some people who believe that smoking is harmful will continue to smoke, some people who believe that animals have a right to life will continue to consume products that rely on animals being killed, and so on. They may justify their actions with reference to some other proposition – e.g. that the risks from smoking are probabilistic, so may not affect them personally; or they may simply live with the mismatch between their beliefs and their behaviour. Nevertheless, the properties of the intelligibilia that make up the Cultural System include sets of logical relations in their own right.

Obviously, different people subscribe to different ideas, but there is no **deterministic** link between social groupings (such as ‘the group of people who occupy a particular location’) and subscribing to particular beliefs (such as ‘following the Hindu religion’). In addition to the ideas to which people subscribe, they also have interests, resources and power. Again, there is no necessary link between sharing material interests (such as owning land and property) and sharing ideas, theories or beliefs. Conflicts between different sets of beliefs are not ‘reducible to the ideational expression of the struggles between material interest groups’ (Archer 1988: 284).

However, it is here that ‘culture’ and ‘structure’ intersect. Groups that are constituted by shared material interests, such as property-owners, for example, may see an advantage in endorsing some elements of the Cultural System and rejecting others. This the mechanism ‘by which cultural factors find their way into the structural field’ (Archer 1988: 285), because ‘the battle between legitimacy and oppositional ideas’ forms ‘part of most struggles and transactions’ (Archer 1988: 284). The power and material interests of groups are structural factors ‘defined somewhere other than in the cultural domain itself’ (Archer 1988: 283), which draws our attention to the role of structure in a variegated ontology.

### **5. A realist perspective on structure**

The reason why RST draws an analytical distinction between culture, agency and structure, is that the structural properties of society are dependent on material resources such as land, food, weapons or factories, whereas culture, as explained above, includes the components of the Cultural System (ideational in nature) and Socio-Cultural interactions. Ideas about what should be done with these resources, including who does or should own them, how they should be distributed and so on, may be drawn on in order to legitimise (some) people’s actions, but resources are ontologically separable from ideas about them or descriptions of them. Moreover, the social structures that constrain and enable the actions of present agents ‘... are the effects of *past actions*, often by long dead people’ (Archer 1995:148). Thus it is a characteristic of social structures that they are irreducible to people, and endure over a much greater timescale than the life of any individual.

It is important to note that this is not a view of structures as fully independent entities operating ‘behind the backs’ of individuals and making them ‘do things’. Structures have relevance to social action because they generate common locations in relation to cultural and material resources. From birth people are inextricably entangled with relations of inequality, of many kinds, that will shape – amongst other things – life chances, aspirations and cultural habits, so that people will find themselves in unequal competition with others. Agency, in the realist sense proposed here, refers to the collective conditions of action that are derived from these common, relational locations. (For example, in a society in which there was no sex discrimination, the collective relations with which we are familiar, where being born female makes holding positions of power statistically less probable than it is for men, would not apply.) It is these common locations that are the sources of agency.

### **6. A realist perspective on agency**

Conventionally, a distinction is often drawn between agency, defined as people who act, and structure, defined as the context in which they do so. We hope we have demonstrated above that RST offers a different perspective, emphasising the qualitatively different properties of culture and structure, their irreducibility and their partial autonomy. People – social actors – have ideas, express themselves through language, interact with others and thus contribute in the short-term to Socio-Cultural interaction and over time to the Cultural System. They also have interests, goals and projects, but their options in realising these are constrained by structural configurations – prior distributions of material resources, sanctioned by some aspects of culture and potentially threatened by others.

If structure refers to persistent patterns of social relations that are temporally stretched compared to the lifetime of any individual, then agency, from an RST perspective, refers to the relational networks within which people find themselves entangled by virtue of the determinate and contingent positions they occupy (as migrant workers, say, or as someone who is unemployed). These networks mediate their actions and the structured social relations within which they necessarily take place. So whilst it is people who act, their actions necessarily engage a network of contextual conditions, many aspects of which will be anterior to the individual, unresponsive to their efforts to realise objectives and discursively impenetrable.

For example, those who took advantage of cheap mortgages in the US did so partly because, as people whose agency was defined in significant ways by their poverty (itself an emergent product of other sources of agency: being black, for instance, or a single parent), they were unlikely to be able to buy a house any other way. And, of course, those who sold mortgages to people they knew were unlikely to be able to pay them back were acting partly in response to their own agential conditions, as employees needing to meet sales targets in a largely unregulated financial market. It is fairly safe to say that neither those buying 'sub-prime' mortgages, nor those selling them, wished to bring about the catastrophic shift in the conditions of their agency that resulted from the financial crash of 2008.

To give another illustration: people with limited resources may respond to the structural pressures of decreasing income by deciding to migrate elsewhere. In these circumstances, their agential resources include their linguistic repertoire – but access to a variety that was an advantage in one context, or 'agential network', may become a liability in another. For example, Roberts (2010, citing Schluter 2010) describes how Kurdish, when spoken in workplaces in Istanbul, is used as an indicator of its speakers being 'unprofessional'. Roberts and her colleagues have repeatedly demonstrated how the registers used in job interviews disadvantage speakers whose earlier experience of this genre leads them to respond to questions in ways that are unacceptable in the new employment context they have moved to.

Agency in the RST sense is therefore distinct from action, and social actors may grasp its outlines only when they undertake purposive action. Agency is relational and dynamic, an aspect of agency that is sometimes difficult to grasp when it is expressed as part of the couplet 'agency and structure', as though these were two identifiable entities interacting with each other. Agency does not refer to a static entity - the thing that interplays with structure - but to an ever-shifting set of conditioning relations. As Layder's work on 'social domains' (1997; 1998) makes clear, a variegated ontological concept of social reality does not entail stratified 'layers' or levels, or slicing up the social world hierarchically in terms of scale, scope and extensiveness. Social domains are 'relatively independent modalities of social reality which intertwine with, and causally influence each other' (Layder forthcoming). Thus we are dealing, analytically, not with a quantitative distinction, between 'the big and the small or micro and macro,' but with 'two *qualitatively* different aspects of society' (Archer 1995: 11). One consequence of structure and agency being different sorts of things is that change in each operates on different temporalities, and these changes will themselves be of different kinds. In the case of structured social relations, events and the changes they bring about range from the ephemeral to the more enduring. For example, suppose two pedestrians bump into each other in the street. It is incumbent on them to negotiate an interactional strategy to manage the consequences, and they are likely to draw on already established protocols as they manage an exit from this fleeting encounter. On the other hand, if two motorists' vehicles collide, the drivers are likely to find themselves entangled with established networks of institutional relations, such as insurance companies, and perhaps with the legal system. The biographical timescale that accompanies changes in individuals' behaviour in both kinds of encounter (from tolerated toddler uncertain of the norms of interaction on the street, to the nervous or reckless new driver, to the

elderly pedestrian with a walking aid) is much shorter than the timescale associated with structural or cultural change (such as transitions in the roles of monarch, church or state in respect of highways, the rights of travellers, concepts of 'vagrancy' etc.). Beliefs and cultural systems, including language practices, are (mostly) slower to change – and this difference is one of the reasons why RST's "analytical dualism" is a methodology based upon the historicity of emergence' (Archer 1995: 66).

### **7. Researching multilingualism and European language policy from an RST perspective**

We see the relevance of these ideas for researching multilingualism in Europe (such as recent EU projects - e.g. Commission of the European Communities 2003; 2005; 2007; Council of Europe n.d.; 1992; 2014 - and others discussed elsewhere in this volume) as having the following theoretical and methodological implications.

Conventionally, people are grouped according to the language(s) they speak and/or the 'culture' to which they are thought to belong. Sometimes the classification is tied to their supposed 'ethnicity' (for critiques see Sealey 2007, Carter and Fenton 2011). Thus, some of the discourse used in policy-making and research, such as the very phrase 'multilingualism in the EU' is potentially misleading; the term emphasizes the idea of multilingualism as an object to be managed, which may obscure that it also denotes a multiplicity of people using language to achieve many different things, always exceeding administrative description. So at the level of the flow of social life, there are many people using language in various routine and creative ways in order to get things done. At the same time, the forms that speakers' creativity takes can, according to the context, be either lauded or stigmatized. Thus the variety of a language that will be valorised is also context-dependent.

Even critics of the reification of languages and cultures (e.g. Blommaert and Rampton 2011) tend to emphasise the proliferation of categories of migrants and speakers, rather than reconceptualising the bases on which the classification rests. From an RST perspective, rather than starting from the identification of 'different cultures', 'different languages' or 'different linguistic groups', research projects would start from the specification of the theoretical grounds on which any group to be researched are identified. People have attachments and identifications with larger groups or collectives, but these are constantly recalibrated by external factors (e.g. EU / national / local language policies) as well as personal decisions (e.g. loyalty to family / peer group / employer). So the categories used in research need to allow for such dynamic processes of identification, that are both driven from within and imposed from outside, as contexts shift and change.

For RST, it is people who generate social change or who seek to resist it. In either case social interaction is driven by people's interests in either improving the situation in which they find themselves or in preventing others from causing that situation to deteriorate. As noted above, the distribution of interests - such that some have an interest in changing things whilst others have an interest in keeping them the same - is the product of an anterior distribution of resources (material and cultural) which gives some more and others less. Research that uses an RST approach, therefore, starts by identifying who has an interest in bringing about change and who has an interest in opposing it. This consists in identifying which collectives have which interests. It requires an explicitly theoretical approach to research methods, since the identification of collectives and their interests is a theoretical enterprise. Moreover neither the collectives nor the interests are static, but rather form a dynamic field whose parameters shift constantly as people reflexively modify their view of their own interests or realize that these interests might be better served by attaching them to the interests of other collectives.

Research proceeds, having identified who has an interest in what, in relation to language practice and policy, to explore how these struggles are enacted (e.g. in a language testing event, in the

development of new ways of organising work in the newsroom, on the street, in the workplace). The second stage of the RST research strategy is thus to investigate the interaction between the various collectives as they seek to advance their interests or to prevent others from advancing theirs. So, although at this stage the emphasis is on the struggles between people and collectives to realize their interests, research strategies must also be able to assess these struggles as structurally generated and conditioned. This again reflects a core ontological claim of RST: that social outcomes are always the result of the interplay between agency, structure and culture. Reducing outcomes to any one of these is inadmissible in a realist approach.

The third stage of the realist research strategy is the assessment of the outcomes of the struggles in stage two. This assessment has a dual character. On the one hand, it is an account of who gets what, of the winners and losers, from the socio-cultural interaction of stage two; a wide range of research methods, quantitative and qualitative, can be used to do this. On the other hand, if the research is to contribute to policy and political discussion, it must also in stage three identify the causal relations relevant to the particular sequence of socio-cultural interaction being investigated (in our case the struggle over the cultural and material resources accessible through particular forms of language use) and the particular contexts in which these relations produce particular outcomes.

All of this entails identifying appropriate research methods which can capture **both** social life **and** the context in which it occurs. The methodological task is to capture the flow and movement of social interaction, its constantly provisional and negotiable character, whilst recognizing that interaction is both facilitated and constrained by its contextual conditions. RST is methodologically open and may be consistent with a range of research methods: ethnography, visual methods, interviews etc. It does not seek to prescribe methods, rather to identify principles with which methods are consistent. However, the theoretical perspective is not consistent with variables-based methods that pre-identify static, researcher-defined or policy-maker-defined social, 'ethnic' or linguistic categories. Social research from an RST perspective uses methodologies which are able to combine the analysis of the interplay between structured social relations, cultural resources (ideas, media and so on) and people, with an exploration of the contexts within which this interplay takes place. Such methodologies therefore are both synchronic, examining the current forms of interplay between structure, culture and agency, and diachronic, examining how and in which ways the context for this interplay has been shaped by earlier forms of it.

## **8. Conclusion**

The application of RST to applied linguistic and sociolinguistic concerns is a relatively recent development, but increasing attention is being paid to the possibilities it offers. Some examples include Block (2013a; 2013b), Carter and Sealey (2000; 2004; 2007), Elder-Vass (2014), Roberts and Joseph (2013), Sealey and Carter (2001; 2004; 2014), Sealey (2007; 2010; 2013). As the links between RST and empirical applied linguistic research are developed, different interpretations of key concepts are emerging, with concomitantly different emphases and implications. This diversity applies to the studies presented in this special issue, whose focus is multilingualism in Europe. The authors, engaging in various ways with aspects of realist social theory, present examples of research into language policy and practice in Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Switzerland.

In his exploration of how speakers conceptualise language, in which he contrasts ideas about uniformity and variation, Jaspert emphasises the tension between what he terms the 'structure and agency perspectives' on language. In his view, the former is linked with pressures for uniformity in language practices (often seen as desirable by policy makers), and the latter with the variation that is characteristic of language as used to achieve speakers' objectives.

A similar perspective is adopted by Marzo and Svendsen. For them, as for Jaspaert, 'structure' and 'agency' are most relevant as perspectives from which language may be viewed. They apply these ideas in their discussion of the way younger speakers in urban contexts both reject the normative prescriptions prevalent in the media and beyond, but nevertheless draw on the labels and concepts that originate there.

Grbavac seeks to link the 'linguistic landscape' research approach to RST, again emphasising the 'structural' properties of linguistic systems themselves, and suggesting how these may be linked with social power and observed in the semiotic environment.

Perrin's worked example of linguistic decision-making in the production of news discourse illustrates some of the tensions between people whose differential agential locations and interests are potentially a source of conflict. The study offers an optimistic perspective on the possibilities for engaging with various tensions associated with multilingualism in Europe. The broader conclusions drawn, and principles outlined, have implications far beyond the specific social setting of the Swiss journalists' newsroom. The article highlights the dynamic interplay between individuals and their management and negotiation of the roles they occupy in structured social relations.

We hope that the dialogue we have sought to open here will continue and involve a widening group of researchers with an interest in RST and issues such as the language policies and linguistic practices of the multilingual population of Europe.

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