David Karlander*

When political institutions use sociolinguistic concepts

Abstract: In this essay, David Karlander examines what happens when concepts developed by scholars of language circulate and become embedded in policies and law. In exploring how the distinction between a "language" and a "dialect" became encoded in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), Karlander examines the consequences when applied to the status and state support of minority languages in Sweden. What counts as a language, he demonstrates, is not simply an "academic" matter. When sociolinguistics enters the public arena, it has the potential to affect the political and social standing of real communities.

Keywords: European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), language policy, Meänkieli, Övdalsk (Elfdalian, Övdalian), politics of linguistics

How do committee-type bodies contribute to the formation, circulation, and societal impact of sociolinguistics? How have such institutions inserted sociolinguistic concepts into institutional or political practice? How has sociolinguistics reacted to the reuse of its conceptual goods? These are some of the important questions that Monica Heller poses in her September 2018 *Items* essay on the SSRC's Committee on Sociolinguistics. In what follows, I delve further into them.

Like Heller, I turn my attention to the borderlands between policymaking, advocacy, and academic research. However, rather than exploring how committee-type institutions attempt to influence or regulate the research priorities of academics, I will focus on processes through which sociolinguistic notions are put to practice by nonacademic institutions. As an example, I discuss some dimensions of the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), a European treaty on "the protection of the historical regional or minority languages of Europe" under the auspices of the Council of Europe (CoE). Arguably, this case can tell us a few important things about the ways in which sociolinguistic perspectives and forms of knowledge have become consecrated outside academia.

*Corresponding author: David Karlander,** The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China,
E-mail: dakar@hku.hk

1 Sociolinguistic concepts in the ECRML

The ECRML was drafted between 1989 and 1992 with the stated aim to create guarantees for the "right to use a regional or minority language in private and public life," thereby redressing past and current assimilatory minority politics in CoE states. A related concern, which grew in priority as the Eastern Bloc disintegrated, was to mitigate potential geopolitical tensions over discrepancies between political and ethnolinguistic borders in a transforming Europe. The ECRML first entered into force in seven European states in 1998. At present, it has been ratified and implemented by 25 sovereign states. It covers a total of 79 languages, some 30 of which are also the official language of signatory or nonsignatory states.

To further the CoE's goal of promoting minority languages, the ECRML provides a unified framework for regulating some dimensions of public, institutionalized language use. It offers a set of formulations about the commitment of signatory states to linguistic diversity, notably that the signatory state must "recognize," "respect," and "facilitate the use" of "regional or minority languages." It also offers a selection of measures intended to "promote the use of regional or minority languages" in seven institutional settings (e. g. education, state bureaucracy, media). Signatory states are required to decide what languages should be covered by the ECRML, and to select and apply a minimum of 35 measures for each language.

The existence of the ECRML is closely linked to the work of a number of committee-type bodies. It was drafted by the *Comité ad hoc sur les langues régionales*, comprised of CoE parliamentarians and bureaucrats, legal experts, and a philologist. The practical implementation of the ECRML is continuously monitored by the Committee of Experts of the ECRML, which comprises a high proportion of scholars of language. Furthermore, state-level adoptions and implementations of the ECRML have been tied to the work of state-appointed committees. In all these bodies, sociolinguistic concepts and points of view have circulated quite widely. As a result of this circulation, certain sociolinguistic notions have become entrenched in policy, both in the ECRML and in state-specific frameworks. This entrenchment, in turn, has enacted tangible effects on the minority language politics of many European states.

A good example of such entrenchment is found in a conceptual distinction in article 1 of the ECRML, where the concepts of language and dialect are first introduced in the charter. The article specifies the necessary conditions for applying the charter's provisions to a specific language. It postulates that the legal category of "regional or minority languages" may only be applied to a

language that is "different from the official language(s) of that State" and is used by nationals of a signatory state "who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the state's population." Article 1 further states that the category "regional or minority language" does not "include either dialects of the official language(s) of the State or the languages of migrants." These formulations endow the concepts of language and dialect with institutional force. Yet none of the concepts are defined.

The ECRML treads on sociolinguistic terrain. Throughout the history of sociolinguistics, dialect has proven a highly durable concept. This is not surprising. After all, the formation of contemporary sociolinguistics after World War II was prefigured by earlier dialectological research on language. Tellingly, the concept of dialect has been put to analytical use in classical sociolinguistic work on the variability of language, notably by Ferguson (1959), Labov (1972), and Gumperz (1978). At the same time, dialect can hardly be said to be an entirely academic notion. It is widely used in ordinary language where it tends to assume a range of meanings. Likewise, this lack of specificity also recurs in the specialized discourse of linguistic research. While it is generally agreed that the concept of dialect seeks to pinpoint some form of linguistic difference, there exists no coherent scholarly view on the nature of this difference. The conceptualization of "dialect" differs not only across different strands of research (e. g. linguistics, sociolinguistics, dialectology), but also within such strands.

To debate whether or not something is a dialect or a language might, for these reasons, come across as quasi-theoretical hair-splitting. Nevertheless, under the institutional framework offered by the ECRML, struggles over precisely these categories are neither trivial nor separable from their practical effects on political and institutional affairs. Sweden's relationship with the ECRML offers an illustrative example.

2 When is something a language? A Swedish case

In 2000, Sweden signed, ratified, and began to implement the ECRML. Its commitment to the charter had been preceded by several years of preparations. A key element of this process was an investigation produced by the Committee on Minority Languages (*Minoritetsspråkskommittén*), which had been appointed by the Swedish parliament in 1995. It consisted of members of parliament, judges, senior bureaucrats, academics, and representatives of a few minority

groups. The committee was instructed to list Sweden's minority languages and to suggest the measures of the ECRML that should be applied to them. In the course of this process, a fair amount of attention was directed to the formulations about "language" and "dialect" in article 1 of the ECRML, more precisely in relation to the following problem: *Should Meänkieli and other varieties of Finnish be treated as dialects of one language or as separate languages?*

Meänkieli, in this context, referred to the forms of nonstandard Finnish used in Sweden's far north, from the Finnish-Swedish border westward. It has also gone by other names: Tornedalian Finnish, Northbothnian Finnish, or simply Finnish. This terminological multiplicity is, arguably, one lasting effect of the Swedish defeat in the 1808–1809 war with Russia and the resulting cession of Finland. As a result of this geopolitical shift, the Finnish-speaking population of circumpolar Scandinavia was split between different states and separate regimes of language. The creation of the border galvanized the Swedish nation-state project and the nationalism that would come to underpin it. From the late nineteenth century, indigenous and minority groups in Sweden's northernmost territories were subjected to increasingly discriminatory policies. The Sámi and Finnish languages, which to some extent had seen previous use in education, were gradually expunged from the schools in the region. Curricula were revised and Swedish-only policies were enforced. From the late 1950s, the assimilatory regime was gradually replaced with a more pluralistic order, which the Swedish commitment to the ECRML in the late 1990s would further support. To achieve this, however, the Committee on Minority Languages had to apply the categories of the ECRML and decide on Meänkieli's classification.

The committee commissioned a separate report on the matter from a leading scholar of bilingualism unaffiliated with the committee. The expectation was a straightforward answer but, as it turned out, the report refrained from taking an explicit stand on whether Meänkieli "was a language or a dialect." Drawing on Einar Haugen's paper "Dialect, Language, Nation," it underscored that the category of "language" typically implied a degree of institutional regulation. The ideological project of "selecting" and "elaborating" a linguistic standard, rather than the prevalence of observable "linguistic differences and similarities between linguistic forms," was presented as a distinctive trait of a "language." The "status as language," as the report concluded, "emerges in political processes" and "depends on political decisions." It thereby refrained from answering, returning the question to the political field where a decision eventually was made. As Sweden ratified the ECRML, Meänkieli and Finnish were recognized as two separate entities. Both became official minority languages along with Sámi, Romani, and Yiddish.

Sometime after Sweden's ECRML ratification, the political entrenchment of the language–dialect binary was asserted once more. In its 2006 report on the implementation of the ECRML in Sweden, the CoE's Committee of Experts of the ECMRL requested that the Swedish government clarify whether Övdalsk (also Elfdalian) was a language or a dialect. The committee had been informed by Övdalsk language activists that Övdalsk was quite different from standard Swedish, as it was incomprehensible to everyone but a couple of thousand native speakers. The activists wished that Övdalsk should be declared a language so that it could be granted some form of official recognition under the ECRML. In 2010, after some hesitation, the Swedish government replied that Övdalsk was a dialect and that the ECRML could not be applied to it. The official position remains a point of contention, in the academic and political fields.

3 Sociolinguistics beyond academia

The above examples deal with a specific history. They can nevertheless serve to make a few points of general relevance for grasping the circulation and impact of sociolinguistic concepts, as well as the relationship between sociolinguistic theorizing and the formation of a certain political-institutional order. Not only does it seem as if concepts that are historically connected to sociolinguistics are capable of mediating the practical imposition or reassertion of a political agenda. Such concepts are, it seems, also prone to being used in this way without much support or guidance from sociolinguists. They may transcend the scholarly practices in which they were created or explicitly theorized, becoming cemented as ordering principles in institutional practice or in practices of policymaking, for instance through the work of expert committees. The concepts of dialect and language can become intimately tied to attempts at regulating institutional language use, and to efforts of granting rights to some and withholding them from others. They may serve to address geopolitical concerns or legitimize ingrained political agendas. More examples can be drawn from the implementation of the ECRML, as well as from virtually any language policy framework operating on a similar scale.

More broadly, it can be said that certain sociolinguistic concepts seem to circulate with ease beyond sociolinguistics. As of late, sociolinguistics has become increasingly sensitized to the effects of domination and injustice that such forms of circulation may entail. This sensibility has, to a large extent, developed in parallel with a steadily growing orientation of sociolinguistics toward various strands of poststructuralist thought. This push for a conceptual

shift, which arguably has accelerated over the last decade, has engendered a sense of unease or reluctance among sociolinguists about the usefulness or reliability of previously respectable concepts. It has also been manifested as a rise and increased use of new concepts and points of view. Some of these concepts are not only bound up with promises of epistemic advances, but often also with promises of justice and equality. Insofar as they would enter into wide circulation, it should be a responsibility of a critical and reflexive sociolinguistics to grasp the effects of this circulation and thereby clarify whether promises made on a theoretical plane are fulfilled in actual practice.

Further reading

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