

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



# State Languages and Territorial Languages

Peter Gelderloos

19 September 2022

The State operates in every terrain it can reach. Everywhere possible, it invades, it divides, it disciplines, it surveils. All to produce and reproduce statist forms of power, which are hierarchical and exploitative. Language is one such arena. The modern state in particular intervenes in language in a colonizing way. Both progressive and reactionary movements use similar techniques of policing and valoration to resist the dominant trends of power but not the fundamental structures of power, whereas anti-state and anticolonial communities or movements tend to fight for an entirely different paradigm of language.

What does this actually mean, beyond the verbiage? Well, our society is full of institutions that exercise a disproportionate influence in creating language, every day of the year. The companies that dominate the TV airwaves and the Hollywood studios, and their more recent equivalents in streaming services; news companies, often the same as the former; schools and universities; social media.

Peter Gelderloos  
State Languages and Territorial Languages  
19 September 2022

Retrieved on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2023 from [petergelderloos.substack.com](http://petergelderloos.substack.com)

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)

Interestingly, conservatives and progressives don't usually want to abolish the aforementioned institutions, and they actually tend to influence language in identical ways, even as they push and pull in opposite directions. They try to imbue some words with a sense of evil, danger, or harm, and they try to imbue other words with a new sense of value, in order to influence how people speak and think. Conservatives identify certain words with efforts of social transformation, like decolonial, pronoun, queer, and they convince everyone they can that these words are laughable, or threatening, or both. They identify other words as covert, strategic signals that allow them to spread their ideals while avoiding criticism of what those ideals entail, so they try to make those words desirable, irreproachable: words like patriotism, nation, homeland.

Progressives, meanwhile, identify certain words with real social harm, and they encourage people not to use those words. On the one hand, this reduces the harm people experience in their day to day lives. On the other hand, it sometimes allows progressives to act like they're doing the good work without having to dismantle the social structures that actually produce those harms on a massive scale. Sometimes, progressives have a good sense of history. Pretty much all the words we are not supposed to say, or that only certain groups are allowed to say, because of racism, are in actual fact words with a strong historical connection to racism. White people, for example, really shouldn't be saying any of those words. On the other hand, when it comes to vocabulary changes related to questions of ability and health, progressives have not been nearly as thoughtful and many of the changes they propose are purely superficial, if not outright contradictory, though that is a topic I should vent in a future newsletter. To summarize, though, I would say that many of the replacement terms are meant to signal respect, which could be good, except that it is a respect that does not go hand in hand with awareness, because the new terms are exact synonyms of the earlier, supposedly

*protecting a stable society from outside contamination and external dangers, to the later version that sees society as containing its own disorder which must be constantly surveilled, recuperated, and redirected?*

George Orwell already made a solid case for how the simplification, the dumbing down, of the English language makes people easier to control. Liberation movements the world over have used literacy classes, reading groups, and the collective debate of theory to sharpen their intellectual weapons and strengthen their struggles, demonstrating that a greater capacity for complex language, a greater capacity for complex thought, and a greater capacity to resist oppression are interrelated.

The greater interconnectivity of today's world means that shared languages can be generated so much faster. The greater role of mass media and social media companies, the architects of the aforementioned connectivity, means that most of the thought-language that is produced, most of our utterances, are increasingly inane. Both a frontline of struggle and an apparatus of hyper-domestication, vapidness, the social networks people dedicate so much attention to are simultaneously sites of sublime poetry and of stupefying mental colonization.

Personally, I do not think those apparatuses can be beaten short of being physically destroyed, and short of being destroyed, they cannot be avoided. The reality is, people will engage with their TikTok, their Twitter, their IG, and justify or elide their engagement after the fact.

But there is another arena for language, and it is no coincidence we have been so thoroughly distracted from it. But it's right here, beneath our feet, the territory we inhabit, where the full breadth of our expressions can find a place to take root and cross-pollinate. And it is always waiting to welcome us back.

base or another. Note the role that State and capitalism play in both those stories of loss and movement.

(I should confess, as I'm trying to be sincere, as we're talking about dialect, particularity, the intimacy of naming, that I do not have a "grandmother" and "grandfather". They're Mam-maw and Peepaw, but you wouldn't call them that, thank you very much.)

There are certain opaque pockets, intimate territories, scattered across North America, the inhabitants of which speak dialects of English so unique that it becomes impossible to quantify in terms of linguistic diversity. These are places people tend to live in their entire lives, places progressives will invariably describe as *backwards*, and they are rooted in geographies that resist the incursions of police and academics alike, from the Great Dismal Swamp and Mississippi River bayous to an archipelago of inner city neighborhoods where practices of material community and mutual aid make up for the imposed scarcity of racial capitalism.

Stateless languages actively reject standardization and homogenization. States systematically colonize language, destroying the mother tongues of people not strong enough to resist, whether migrants or conquered peoples, and stamping out variation in the metropolitan tongue. This violent process of flattening makes language easier to police and surveil by bureaucracies of control, which require standardization and homogenization.

However, the State is purely parasitic in this regard. It cannot create language. People create language, continuously, even (especially) in the most restrictive of dungeons. Here's an interesting hypothesis, in case anyone out there finds time to test it:

*Language, like life itself, is chaotic. The State cannot create it out of whole cloth, nor bend it to a stable Law. What if the State's need for constant intervention in the field of language helped push it from the early modern version of policing as pro-*

offensive terms they are meant to replace, or because they assume homogeneity in a group that is far from homogeneous. I remember a time someone implied I was being oppressive for using a term that applies to a health difference that I experience, like I wasn't even allowed to self-identify.

What are the kind of changes that lie beyond this paradigm? It is famously hard to imagine one paradigm from within another, because every paradigm contains an infinity of different arrangements, details, questions that can be asked, debates that can be held, changes that can be proposed. It's not the total list of all the things that constitute Everything, it's what holds Everything together, it's how the whole produces the perspective and the tools to understand itself, to talk to itself.

Imagine all the hundreds of thousands of paintings that have been painted from the Renaissance to today, all their range and diversity, all the time you could spend looking at each of them, analyzing them... and how easy it would be never to ask yourself, how peculiar a thing is a frame.

My mother tongue is English. My parents speak CNN English, that bland, aspiring middle-class dialect, the North American variety. My maternal grandmother says *y'all*, though she's mostly suppressed her Carolina twang over a lifetime of travelling from place to place. My paternal grandfather spoke with the pursed vowels of the Midwest. Though he didn't speak much.

For the past fifteen years, however, I've lived in Catalunya, and my daily tongue has been Catalan, and secondly Spanish. Since I learned in Barcelona, my Spanish contains plenty of catalanisms. My Catalan, likewise, was rife with *espanyolismes* but, as a language nerd susceptible to linguistic patriotism, I purged them all as soon as I moved out of the capital.

An avowed anarchist, I nonetheless believe two forms of patriotism are acceptable, even healthy: a patriotism of language and a patriotism of mountains. Or the sea. Or other, lesser geo-

graphic features and biomes. I shudder to think it, but I suppose even people from the flatlands must feel proud of their plains.

Anarchists who speak English, or Spanish, or German, or French, or Russian, or a combination of the five as their principal and only tongues, will often argue that pride in one's language is nationalist. I ignore them, as they have no idea what they're talking about.

*Territory*, in English, is a tragic word. It is weighted down with connotations of property, ownership, demarcation, exclusion, competition. I much prefer the word in Catalan. *Territori*. There, it resides closer to its root, *terra*. Earth. But not earth in the abstract, neither the spaceship nor the interchangeable quantity, land. But this earth, this land, *right here*. "Defensa del territori", defense of the territory, is a common phrase to come across in the social movements. It has none of the jealous, racist mood of the IDF, the Minutemen, the Homeowners Association. It is not a wall to stand on, a border to man. It means defending the land we know and love from the rich bastards despoiling it, this land, *our* land. Not ours in the liberal sense of private property, but the earth that belongs to us only insofar as we belong to it. It is a relationship, and one that requires intimate knowledge.

It is also the site of an entirely different paradigm of language.

On a couple occasions I have been invited to participate in solidarity projects in Wallmapu, a country occupied by the settler states of Chile and Argentina. One of the many things the *penyi* filled me in on as they welcomed me was to casually mention the different varieties of Mapudungun (the Mapuche language) and the specific, albeit borderless, territories they are connected to.

Later, this would remind me of the different *països catalans*, the Catalan countries, each with their own version of the language. For most of the modern period, which is the period in which states have deployed technologies of power that enabled

them to better domesticate one of humanity's greatest, wildest, and most chaotic inventions, language, Catalunya has not had its own state; it has been subject to the Spanish and French states. However, one of the four Catalan countries has its own Catalan-speaking bourgeoisie, and since the end of the Franco dictatorship three of them have had local governments with some degree of autonomy and intervention in matters of language. So, Catalan is halfway down the spectrum between a stateless language and a statist language, and we can see many of the results.

Government destroys linguistic diversity. Catalan, with just four million native speakers, has more diversity than North American English, with its hundreds of millions of speakers. And nearly all of that diversity comes down to regional variation.

Language ties us to the land, this land, our land. *La terra*. It is how we relate to our environment, name our fellow creatures, and name ourselves in relation to them. To be out collecting *farigola*, or just a little farther south, *timonet*; to see a *burumbot*, *burumballa*, or *espiadimonis* on the leaf of a *xop* or *pollancre*... how we move through the world, how we name it, discovering that our words for it are different, just as we have different ways of cooking the rice (*the right way and the wrong way, toma ya!* I can hear my Valencian friends laughing); it reaffirms the particularity of our connection.

There is one exception to the comparison I made in the prior paragraph, regarding English being more homogeneous. In describing my family history, I hinted at the presence and loss of diversity. My parents, who lost their regional accents as they climbed from the working class to the professional/bureaucratic class; my grandmother, who left her deep South dialect behind as she lost her connection to place, to territory, in order to move around with her family, with my grandfather, who stayed in the military after the war and had to live on one