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Linguistic purism and language criticism in European perspective

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Abstract. This article examines the postulate of the 'purity' of language, which was previously presented for the different language cultures individually, comparatively in diachronic and synchronic perspective, correlating the different traits. ›Linguistic purism‹ is hereby seen as both criticism of language use and criticism of forms and structures of a language. The comparative article illustrates in which constellations of languages linguistic purism was relevant in the past and still is today and how the individual languages were and are affected by language-puristic activities. Finally, the article will compare the actors and specific discursive connections between the different language cultures.

Keywords
purification,
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organisations for
the cultivation
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standardisation

A note on reading the article:

This article brings together the central aspects from the articles on the different languages in this collection. For deeper understanding of the individual language cultures it is recommended to read the articles on each of these, which also include references to secondary literature.

The postulate of the ›purity‹ of language has been documented since ancient times and is associated, for instance, with Aristotle, Cicero, and Atticus (Fögen 2000: 125, 128). Over the course of time, its development in the investigated language cultures is linked with diverging strategies of purifying the language of linguistic elements that interfere with this purity. Language-puristic discourses are typically opposed to linguistic dynamism and change and often argue with the diffuse idea of a ›linguistic threat‹ to speakers' social or national identity. ›Linguistic purism‹ thus represents both a critique of the language use of individual language users as well as a critique of specific linguistic forms or structures. Language-puristic tendencies increase or decrease depending on socio-political, economic, and cultural developments.

Language-puristic discourses and activities are especially linked with the following language constellations: 1.) the demarcation of a

transregional or national standard, 2.) language contact, and 3.) real or perceived cultural domination by or exceptional prestige of another language. Thus, the adoption of loan words is, for instance, often seen as a sign of weakness by the recipient language (Schmitt 1996: 873). When building a nation state or in times of putative threats to the unity of the nation (e.g. France – *une nation, une langue!*) language-puristic activities are on the rise. The most popular form of linguistic purism is foreign-word purism, which serves to defend one's own language from the influence of others. This may take the form of a general rejection or may be supported by reference to an alternative usage. The languages that were particularly in focus of language-puristic criticism have changed over the centuries. While the rejection of Latin and French lexemes was an issue in England in the 16th and 17th century, it was mainly Latin that was in the focus of attention in France at that time. In the German-speaking regions of the 17th and 18th centuries the rejection of both Latin and French lexemes is connected with the creation of a national language. The *Verdeutschungswörterbuch* of 1801 is a well-known testimony of this type of linguistic purism. In Croatia linguistic purism especially targeted Italian loan words (and Venetian in particular) in the 17th and 18th centuries, whereas Latin was approved as the language of education, and lexemes from other Slavic languages were regarded as acceptable models. While in France puristic efforts against foreign words were at times subsiding since the 18th century, there was a continuous rejection of foreign words, meaning particularly French lexemes, in Germany, Italy, and England until the middle of the 20th century. In Croatia, however, French loan words were appreciated until the middle of the 20th century, while German loan words were (in the context of Austrian and – during the Second World War – German rule) frowned upon. In the second half of the 20th century, loan-word purism has culminated in the fight against Anglicisms in Germany, Italy, and France in particular (e.g. ›Neo-purism‹ in Italy). Croatia has remained moderate, as the country is the gateway between east and west in the post-war era; ever since the 1990s, Anglicisms have gained approval, which could be interpreted as token of a pro-Western political orientation.

However, linguistic purism is not merely foreign-word purism but opposes all kinds of neologisms, whilst appreciating archaic variants. In France, language-puristic tendencies can be seen in language-ideological

discussions about the adequacy of language use (*abus des mots*), which is much less of an issue in the other language cultures. Since the end of the 20th century, language-puristic statements are shared online and offline in audio-visual media, usually aiming at defending and protecting the national language (in Germany and France). Ever since Croatia's independence (1991), Croatian linguistic purism opposes the Serbo-Croatianisms of former Yugoslavia and thus serves to protect the Croatian national language, which has a long documented history.

Organisations for the cultivation of language (academies, linguistic societies), individual societal and ideological groups (e.g. Fascist linguistic purism in Italy, media) but also individuals (politicians, writers or (other) linguistic non-professionals) act as mediators for linguistic purism. Ever since the foundation of language academies (Italy, France, and Spain as well as Croatia) and the processes of standardisation (Germany, England/ Great Britain), an idealised language, only used or accomplished by few authors, acts as a model by which the purity of the language is measured. These idealisations and upvaluations often entail the rejection of individual regional or social varieties (e.g. Italy – idealisation of Tuscan, Croatia – election of Štokavian from Dubrovnik and rejection of other dialects).

Language-puristic essays and argumentations are integrated in a variety of discourses in the respective language cultures or nations (e.g. Italy – *Questione della lingua*; France – *Dire, ne pas dire*; Germany and linguistic nationalism; England and *correct usage*). In order to counter and demystify language-puristic discourses, linguists refer to the concepts of language variation and change, language and identity construction and also guide or advise the terminological work of the state (France). Schmitt (1996: 872–874) however, does not only see lay-linguist argumentation patterns in the various language-puristic discourses. Even at the end of the 20th century, linguists working at standardising the Galician orthography described their procedure of opposing Castilian loan words as purism (*purismo*), the adoption of these loan words having been explained by the political hegemony of Castile (Santamarina 2004).

References

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