

# *National Language and National Culture*

## THE FORMATION OF MODERN NATIONAL LANGUAGES

Historical research into the origins of national languages and cultures directly reinforces the psychological research I have just traced. History explains from a quite different vantage point why the level of one's literacy depends upon the breadth of one's acquaintance with a national culture. History also shows why the connection between literacy and national culture is a general principle of modern times, one that holds true for all modern nations.

If you drive in the French Riviera and stop at the town of Menton, you can find small children speaking rapidly in excellent French. Their easy mastery of French grammar and pronunciation will seem charming and enviable. If you then drive east from Menton for just a few minutes and pass over a line painted across the road, you will come to the town of Ventimiglia. There you can find small children speaking charming, enviable Italian. To the children on both sides of the painted line, and perhaps to you, it all seems quite normal: the easy mastery of French or Italian, the arbitrariness of the border, and the fact that the painted line determines which language the children speak. We have come to accept such arrangements as being natural, but from a linguistic point of view they are not. French and Italian, as well as English and all the other national languages, were just as consciously and politically constructed as

the national borders that separate them. These standardized national languages were fixed in essentially their present forms by seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and (in some countries) nineteenth-century language normalizers who made their decisions, more often than not, at the direction of a central national government. National languages and national borders are codependent artifices. Taken together they have generated one of the most important features of the modern world — the huge, linguistically homogeneous populations of the industrial nations.<sup>1</sup>

That small children should speak Hungarian inside the borders of Hungary (or Polish inside the borders of Poland), and that the language spoken in one place in Hungary should be the same as that spoken in another, is a situation that can exist with such precision only because it is carefully sustained by the Hungarian system of education. Inside a national border, education helps to keep the national language stable by holding it to standards that are set forth in national dictionaries, spelling books, pronunciation guides, and grammars. In the modern world we therefore find linguistic diversity among the nations but, with a few exceptions, linguistic uniformity inside the nations. This pattern did not arise by chance; it is a self-conscious political and educational arrangement.

Consider the languages of Europe in their natural earlier state, before they were standardized into national literary languages. In the Middle Ages it often happened that only closely neighboring dialects were dependably intelligible to one another. If you traveled four villages away instead of three you might not be able to understand what people were saying. A dialect map for the fourteenth century would show isoglosses marking off domains of mutual unintelligibility between speakers.<sup>2</sup> No linguistic lines were painted across the road; the shifting linguistic borders could be drawn differently, depending on which dialect was used as a base. What's more, these languages changed radically over time. A fourteenth-century Rip Van Winkle waking from a sleep of a hundred — rather than twenty — years might find it hard to understand the speech of his children's grandchildren. The natural law of oral languages is constant change, but that law has been amended by the development of national written languages sustained by national systems of education.

A little more than a hundred years ago, in the 1870s, Henry

Sweet, the distinguished linguist who was the model for Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*, predicted that in a hundred years the English, Australians, and Americans would be speaking mutually incomprehensible languages because of their great distance and isolation from each other.<sup>3</sup> Sweet was one of the most knowledgeable linguists of his day, and his prediction was one that other scholars of the time would have agreed with. Up to Sweet's time, language had followed the universal law of constant change. Whenever people who spoke the same oral dialect divided from each other geographically, their languages also came to diverge. That is why, judging by previous linguistic history, Sweet's prediction seems sound. Before the spread of literacy in the nineteenth century, speakers had neither an external standard nor an internal gyroscope to keep their languages stable. Thus, in the eighteenth century Alexander Pope wrote:

Our sons their fathers' failing language see,  
And such as Chaucer is, shall Dryden be.<sup>4</sup>

But Pope and Sweet were wrong. We not only understand the British and Australians today and they us, but we are able to read Pope and Dryden, and most American schoolchildren can read *Gulliver's Travels* by Pope's contemporary Jonathan Swift. The modern English language has turned out to be far more stable than anyone in those days could have predicted. The same has been true of other European languages.

The monolingual nation as we know it developed alongside a new kind of social and economic organization — the industrial nation state. In earlier, agrarian times, when economies were local, one's occupation and position in the community were fixed. Because the economic unit was confined to a small area, an oral dialect sufficed, and the mutual unintelligibility of different dialects within a large region was no serious handicap to economic and social life. When foreign travelers and traders of those times needed a language beyond the local dialects, they could use an international language like the *lingua franca* or the *koine*. These were the earlier equivalents of the great modern national languages, each of which now functions as a *lingua franca* within a nation.

After the industrial revolution, that is, some time in the eighteenth century, economic arrangements required a different political and linguistic system. Economic units became larger, and economic advance became perpetual. The water wheel gave way to the steam engine, the steam engine to the internal combustion engine, and so on. The worker had constantly to adapt to new, more efficient methods. Because of the continually changing occupations that were increasingly demanded by large industrial societies, people had to communicate with a wider economic and social community. Achieving wider communication required literacy and a common language. At the same time, the political system had to become correspondingly bigger, requiring wider circles of communication to carry out laws and provide centralized authority.

The correlation of modern nationhood and the needs of industrial society is a thesis that Ernest Gellner develops brilliantly in his *Nations and Nationalism*.<sup>5</sup> The formation of the modern nation makes possible complex communication on a large scale, which makes possible, in turn, the specializations of modern industrial society.<sup>6</sup> To meet the needs of the wider economy, the modern industrial nation requires widespread literacy. At the heart of modern nationhood is the teaching of literacy and a common culture through a national system of education.

"Nationalism," Gellner writes, "is rooted in a certain kind of division of labor, one which is complex, and persistently, cumulatively changing." Consequently, what is needed is a general education in a common culture. Gellner goes on to observe:

The major part of training in industrial society is generic training... Industrial society may by most criteria be the most highly specialized society ever; but its educational system is the *least* specialized, the most universally standardized that has ever existed... It is assumed or hoped that every properly trained recruit can be retrained from one specialism to another without too much loss of time.<sup>7</sup>

Because of modern economic needs, the goals of language standardization and universal literacy become ever more urgent. Gellner describes education in cultural literacy as the central requirement of industrial society:

Universal literacy and a high level of numerical, technical and general sophistication are among [industrial society's] functional prerequisites. Its members . . . must be able to communicate by means of written, impersonal, context-free, to-whom-it-may-concern-type messages. Hence these communications must be in the same shared and standardized linguistic medium and script.<sup>8</sup>

Gellner's analysis explains the underlying reasons for the development of standardized languages and modern national economies and also explains why enormously expensive systems of education are universal in the modern nations. Totalitarian nations may pay only lip service to such ideals as free speech and free elections. But their guarantee of universal education is, as Gellner says, "an ideal more honored in the observance than the breach. In this it is virtually unique among modern ideals, and this calls for an explanation." The explanation lies in the weighty consequences that proceed from education in our society.

The employability, dignity, security, and self-respect of individuals, typically, and for the majority of men now hinges on their *education* . . . A man's education is by far his most precious investment, and in effect confers his identity on him. Modern man is not loyal to a monarch, or a land, or a faith, whatever he may say, but to a culture . . . [This] school-transmitted culture, not a folk-transmitted one, alone confers usability and dignity and self-respect on industrial man.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, large-scale social and cultural unification based on general education and a standard written language were effects whose causes were sometimes obscure to the societies that produced them. But the manufacturer of textile goods certainly realized that he had to communicate in writing with his distant shippers, customers, and suppliers. The bureaucrat engaged in army raising or tax raising realized that he had to communicate with officials and citizens throughout the land. The new economy with its multiple specialties, and the new nation with its bureaucratic structures, required an ever broader use of the written word, and people

became increasingly aware of the need for universal literacy and a common language. Everywhere sentiment grew to "improve" and "ascertain" — that is, to stabilize — the national languages.<sup>10</sup>

The economic and technical forces that first led to language standardization and mass literacy have continued to gain momentum. Now that economic relationships are instantaneous and global, national vocabularies have grown still larger in scope. Our national vocabulary has three distinct domains. The first is international. Basic literacy in the contemporary world requires knowledge of certain terms known by literate people everywhere in the world, no matter what language they speak. This core lexicon of modern education includes basic words from world history, world cultures, geography, and the physical and biological sciences. Taught in all national educational systems, and not confined to any particular national language, it is the most broadly shared literate vocabulary in the world.

Lying beyond the core is the sphere of vocabulary needed for literacy in English, no matter in what country the language is used. Words like *Achilles* and *Scrooge* and *Falstaff* and *Cinderella* belong to cultural literacy in all nations where English is spoken, even if they were founded recently. This broad knowledge belongs to transnational cultural literacy in English, a sphere that is shared by literate Britons, Indians, South Africans, Americans, and Austrians. Despite grumblings in all these countries about the foreign, all-too-English character of these traditional elements, they are probably here to stay, because they form a useful basis for international exchanges in English.

But in addition to broadly shared, international spheres of knowledge, every literate person today has to possess information and vocabulary that is special to his or her own country. A literate Briton has to know more about the game of cricket and the Corn Laws than an American. An American has to know more about baseball and the Bill of Rights than a Briton. Textbooks containing a national vocabulary have always been developed in evolving nations.<sup>11</sup> In the early days of development, this dimension of cultural literacy is usually standardized along with the standard version of the national language. To explain the character and significance of

this historical development, it is helpful to contrast Europe with China. Why did linguistic and national standardization arise in Europe in the eighteenth century but not in China?

By the seventeenth century, China had printing presses and stable written language. But even after the arrival of printing, the oral Chinese language did not become standardized throughout the country. To this very day, China is a polyglot nation of mutually unintelligible dialects. And in the early years of the twentieth century, China presented a cautionary picture of what can happen in the modern world to a populous nation that lacks language unification and standardization. In the absence of a standard tongue China was not able to function successfully as a modern industrial and economic unit.

What kept China from achieving language standardization? Part of the answer is simple and direct. European languages use an alphabetic system of writing that connects writing and speaking. The written spellings are stable, and because of the alphabetic — that is, semiphonetic — system of writing, the standardized spellings have a definite connection with spoken sounds. Widespread schooling in spelling and pronunciation keeps the sounds of the language from straying very far. Schoolteachers in Australia use basically the same standards of pronunciation and spelling as schoolteachers in Britain and America.<sup>12</sup> The written language as taught in school thus stabilizes the spoken. This is why Sweet's 1877 prediction went wrong. If you are able to read and write English you can make yourself understood when speaking to another person who can read and write English. But if you are able to read and write Chinese you will not necessarily be able to speak to another person who can read and write Chinese, for the Chinese written symbol is not phonetic. Although the meaning of a written symbol is the same for every Chinese dialect, it represents different sounds in different dialects. The chief dialects of China are in fact mutually unintelligible, and the only way speakers of different dialects can communicate is by writing notes to one another.

Thus the standardization of writing and the spread of reading did not have the same stabilizing effect on language in China as it had in Europe. On the other hand, the example of modern Japan shows that effective standardization of the spoken language is pos-

sible without alphabetic script, as long as a national system of education enforces common standards for pronunciation and grammar. Nonetheless, the easiest way to standardize and stabilize a language is to follow the European pattern: fix upon a single dialectal norm, freeze its grammar at a particular time, fix standard spellings, and fix pronunciations that are reasonably well represented by the spellings. Conscious of this, China recently attempted the transcription of Chinese into Western alphabetic script and has set up a single dialect — the Mandarin — as the basis for the national language. The size, labor, expense, and dislocation of this undertaking were breathtaking, and that China was willing to undertake it showed an appreciation of the importance to a modern nation of fixing a common national language in both spoken and written forms.<sup>13</sup>

From the standpoint of cultural literacy, the interventionist character of eighteenth-century language standardizing in Europe is useful for illustrating the need for self-conscious planning in national education. Fixed national languages are deliberate constructs. In France the process began as early as 1635, when the king issued royal letters patent to the French Academy, instructing it to "labor with all care and diligence to give certain rules to our language, and to render it pure, eloquent, and capable of treating the arts and sciences." Thus the French Academy marched under the banner of "purifying" the language, and, indeed, purification was the usual ideology or metaphor under which the dictionary-making process was carried out. But the real job of the French Academy and other dictionary-making groups elsewhere was to fix the usage, grammar, and spelling of the national language. They were to establish one form of spelling and pronunciation as the norm, to promulgate it in authoritative dictionaries and grammars, and, in consequence, to eliminate all other dialects, spellings, and pronunciations in order to create a single standard language.

As it was in France, so was it in Spain. Because of the importance of Spanish on the current U.S. scene, it's worth mentioning that the language now spoken by Hispanics in our country was developed by exactly this same deliberate process. Spanish is no more an "ethnic" language than French. By the time of the conquistadores, efforts to standardize written Spanish had made headway, but the

final consolidation came in the early eighteenth century, when newly formed Spanish Academy, under the duke of d'Escalona, given the task of purifying and improving the Spanish language under royal authority. The academy, called the Real (Royal) Academia de la Lengua, was to issue a dictionary that distinguished correct words from "low, obsolete or barbarous" ones. In practice, court Castilian was set up as the dialect base of the Spanish national language — and forever after the Castilian-based *Diccionario* of the academy has been the permanent basis for school instruction wherever Spanish is taught and spoken.<sup>14</sup>

The standardization of English achieved the same result, but more indirect means. Although England did not establish a national academy, prominent intellectuals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, proposed one, and others agitated to purify and ascertain the language in dictionaries and grammars. The famous authoritative dictionary issued by Samuel Johnson in 1755 was the most important member of this series. Webster's dictionary (1806) was based on Johnson's but it added well-known, minor changes in spelling (as in dropping *u* in *honour* and in *theater* instead of *theatre*). With few exceptions since Johnson's day, English spelling, grammar, and punctuation as well as the main features of usage, have remained stable. The only deviations from current forms that I find in the Declaration of Independence are *hath* for *has* and *compleat* for *complete*. Surprisingly, Jefferson and Hancock followed earlier dictionaries, not the Tory Johnson, in their spellings of *public* and *honor*, making their document seem all the more up to date to us.<sup>15</sup>

The most striking characteristic of language standardizing is its initial arbitrariness, which is similar to that of setting up almost any common standard. Early grammarians and the makers of spelling books and dictionaries were often forced to choose from among several accepted possibilities, and in all cases had to freeze the then current form of the language, thus inhibiting further grammatical or phonetic evolution. When a group of scientists met in Paris in 1795 to decide on the length of the standard meter bar, they had an elaborate justification for the particular length they chose, just as Samuel Johnson offered justifications for his decisions about spelling.<sup>16</sup> But that justification was irrelevant to the utility of the

meter as a common standard for measuring length. Any usable length would have served the purpose equally well. Language normalizers have always offered justifications for their choices from among current forms. But beyond helping to give the decisions a socially persuasive force, little hinges on such justifications. The fact of a common standard is much more important than the intrinsic character of the standard chosen.

The meter bar, like the French language itself, was established by a central authority in Paris. By contrast, the British system of language standardizing was less imperious, less obviously imposed from above. But the British system achieved the same final result as the French. Both approaches to standardization always achieve the same result. But an important difference between establishing the meter as a standard of measurement and establishing a standard written language is that the language must be constructed on less rational principles. The choice of forms and conventions of word order and grammar must all be taken from currently accepted forms, whether or not these have any inherent symmetry or efficiency. One form must be chosen from among several candidates and declared to be the pure or correct one.<sup>17</sup>

Take, as an example of this process, what happened to the verb in standard written English. Long before the eighteenth century, the present tenses of verbs had begun to lose special endings, because English had largely dispensed with such inflections. Modern English indicates the grammatical relationships between words by the relative positions of the words. (Some of the special inflected forms we retain are the *s* to denote plural nouns and the final *d* to denote past tense in verbs.) But in modern English the special forms of verbs that denote first, second, and third person are no longer necessary. Nonetheless, despite the usual absence of inflection in the verb we still say:

|                |          |
|----------------|----------|
| I run          | We run   |
| You run        | You run  |
| He/she/it runs | They run |

All the forms in the present tense are uniform except for the *s* in he, she, or it runs. The *s* is a special ending to denote the third

person and distinguish it from first and second persons. But modern English it is quite pointless to distinguish the person by special ending. We don't say "runs" to mean "he runs," as the Italians do. (If we did, it would make sense to use different verb forms for the different persons.) But since we always say "he runs," the *s* doesn't tell us anything about who is doing the running that we don't already know.

Hence the form "he run," used in some oral dialects, would not only be sufficient, it would make the verb entirely regular. People would need to learn just one form for the present tense. That arrangement would not only be more rational, it would represent a more advanced stage in the development of a syntactic language, as the linguist Jespersen has argued.<sup>18</sup> It is a pattern that English would surely have reached if it had remained an oral language and been allowed to evolve further.<sup>19</sup> In fact, as a dialectal form, "he run" has evolved independently in many different isolated places, in both America and Britain. If plain *run* is good enough for *I, you, we, they*, why isn't it good enough for *he, she, it*? Because we have no choice in the matter. The decision was made by those who fixed our grammar at a certain stage of its evolution, and their decision will probably stand forever.

Even more pointless linguistically is the standardized form of the verb *to be*, where the related forms don't even sound related.

I am  
You are  
He/she/it is

We are  
You are  
They are

Contrast this model, from the standpoint of simplicity and efficiency, with the more advanced pattern developed in many oral dialects of English:

I be  
You be  
He/she/it be

We be  
You be  
They be

That is a far more effective and rational pattern. It, too, has developed independently in many different isolated oral dialects.<sup>20</sup> But

for all its virtues, this superior pattern is highly unlikely to replace the arbitrarily fixed national standard.

Before Samuel Johnson's day, the first language normalizers of Britain were not content merely to fix certain illogical patterns of grammar, they were also illogical pedants in the matter of spelling, having left us some very peculiar spellings that, on the evidence, were never sounded as the letters indicate. The word *doubt*, for instance, never had a *b* sound in English.<sup>21</sup> Why then spell it with a *b*? Because schoolmasters chose to show a connection between the English word *doubt* and the Latin word *dubito*, an unwise decision that created a tension between the standard spelling and pronunciation of the word. But it would be even more unwise to tamper with established spellings that are now recognized by everyone in hundreds of thousands of books. It is much better to stick to them, whatever their intrinsic drawbacks.<sup>22</sup>

These examples show that national languages are essentially different from oral dialects.<sup>23</sup> Even linguists have been known to miss the distinction between unconsciously evolving oral dialects and consciously created written languages. They have been corrected as follows by Dr. M. M. Guxman, a Soviet specialist in national languages:

One should not separate the formation of a written language from the activity of normative theoreticians, from the creation of normative grammars and first dictionaries, or from the activity of language societies, academies, etc. The negative sides of this normalization in the history of individual languages are widely known. . . . The normalization of the language in 16th- and 17th-century Italy or France was of interest undoubtedly, to a relatively narrow social stratum. However the formation of a new type of written language is impossible without conscious normalization, without theoretical comprehension of the norm, and codification of definite rules of pronunciation, usage, and inflection. As material taken from the histories of various languages shows, the formation process of the written norm of a national language is so complex, the regularities of the process so specific in contrast to the life of a regional dialect that the written norm is never in fact the simple codification of a system of dialect characteristics of any one region.<sup>24</sup>



The process of creating a national language could hardly be more than what Dr. Guxman describes, and her views are seconded by the American specialist Einar Haugen.<sup>25</sup> An oral dialect cannot be transposed directly into a standard written language. The conditions of oral dialects evolved from using language in face-to-face situations, whereas written languages, which Haugen calls *grapholects*, must be adapted to anonymous situations in which the writer cannot be sure who the reader will be. Oral dialects have no settled conventions for sustaining long sentences, so these have to be invented. Oral dialects lack the vocabulary needed to serve the needs of economic, scientific, and administrative functions of the nation. Since the required words do not exist, they have to be specially invented for the national language.

The self-conscious, artificial element in national written languages shouldn't make us misconceive them as purely artificial constructs like Esperanto. They are living organisms. Once their grammar and spelling are fixed, national languages always evolve the means to deal with changing circumstances, just as oral dialects do. Written languages even exhibit occasional changes in grammar and spelling of great interest to lexicographers. But these events are comparatively rare and occur with glacial slowness, because of the conservatism of writing. But standard languages are not conservative in evolving vocabulary. New words are constantly coming into use, and old ones are constantly disappearing. In short, though standard languages were created artificially, they continue to evolve naturally.

But in many other respects national languages are distinct from oral dialects. Among several distinctive features that make them especially significant phenomena, Dr. Guxman has stressed one that is language is a conscious construct that transcends any particular dialect, region, or social class.<sup>26</sup>

#### THE FORMATION OF MODERN NATIONAL CULTURES

What may be less obvious is that every national culture is similarly contrived. It also transcends dialect, region, and social class and is

and a conscious construct. National cultures were formed on many of the same principles as national languages, and for many of the same reasons, as Ernest Gellner observes:

The cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions. Any old shred or patch would have served as well. But in no way does it follow that the principle of nationalism itself, as opposed to the avatars it happens to pick up for its incarnations, is in the least contingent and accidental. Nothing could be further from the truth than such a supposition. Nationalism is not what it seems, and above all, not what it seems to itself. The cultures it claims to defend and revive are often its own inventions, or are modified out of all recognition.<sup>27</sup>

Gellner shows that nation builders use a patchwork of scholarly folk materials, old songs, obscure dances, and historical legends, all apparently ~~quaint and local~~ and local, but in reality selected and reinterpreted by intellectuals to create a culture upon which the life of the nation can rest.

If the nationalism prospers it eliminates the alien high culture, but it does not then replace it by the old local low culture; it revives, or invents, a local high (literate, specialist-transmitted) culture of its own, though admittedly one which will have some links with the earlier folk styles and dialects. But it was the great ladies at the Budapest Opera who really went to town in peasant dresses, or dresses claimed to be such.<sup>28</sup>

Because language making has been studied more than culture making, the historical process of creating a national culture is perhaps less well understood. But the need for a culture in building a nation is really just another dimension of the need for a language. A nation's language can be regarded as a part of its culture, or conversely, its culture can be regarded as the totality of its language. The American legend about Lincoln in his log cabin can be conceived either as part of our culture, or, with equal justification, as part of our shared language. Americans need to learn not just the

grammar of their language but also their national vocabulary. They need to learn not just the associations of such words as to run but also the associations of such terms as *Teddy Roosevelt*, *DNA*, and *Hamlet*.

For nation builders, fixing the vocabulary of a national culture is analogous to fixing a standard grammar, spelling, and pronunciation. When culture makers begin their task in the early days of a nation, they are limited, as are language normalizers, by the range of materials that history has made available to them, but the choices made from those possibilities are not always inevitable.<sup>29</sup> Abraham Lincoln was certain to become a central figure in our culture, but Betsy Ross was not. The candidates for her position of legendary Revolutionary War heroine were potentially many. But Martha Crabtree, Sarah Smith, and Janet Blair were weighed in the balance and found wanting. Such choices are no more inevitable than the spelling *monk* instead of *munk*.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to using dictionaries that transmit the national language to all parts of the nation, national systems of education use textbooks and readers that carry the national culture to outlying provinces. After Napoleon's time, it used to be said that on a particular day in France each child in the fifth grade would be reading the same page of the same textbook. The British, like the Americans, used more subtle means for achieving the same uniformity. Textbooks were not prepared by the central government but by the provinces. The effect, however, was the same.

The story of one such provincial textbook, Blair's *Rhetoric*, is instructive. In 1762, seven years after the publication of Johnson's dictionary, the first professorship of English was established, and significantly, it was created in the provinces — in Scotland — where instruction in English national culture was felt to be needed. The new chair was the Regius Professorship of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (i.e., composition and literature) at the University of Edinburgh. The first holder of the chair, Hugh Blair, was a Scot. In 1783 he delivered the fruit of twenty years of teaching, his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, to an eager public that had already been using pirated versions of his *Rhetoric* based on notes from his university lectures.

Blair's book became one of the most influential textbooks ever

issued in Great Britain or the United States. Between 1783 and 1911 it went through 130 editions.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century the *Rhetoric* remained in the college and school curriculum on both sides of the Atlantic. Its authority in the United States persisted long after the Civil War. Designed as a college text, it was condensed and adapted for use in schools, and it influenced the contents of other school readers and spellers.

What did Blair's book contain? Its index includes not one mention of a Scottish poet, despite the distinction of Blair's fellow Scotsmen William Dunbar and Robert Henryson. Blair and his public implicitly understood that his job was to introduce his students and readers to the specific tradition that they needed to know if they were to read and write well in English. He was thus an early, perhaps the first, definer of cultural literacy for the English national language. He gathered and codified for the Scots materials that literate Englishmen had absorbed through the pores. The clarity and authority of his book made it nearly as influential in fixing the cultural content of the language as Johnson's dictionary was in fixing its forms. Blair created, in effect, a dictionary of cultural literacy for those who had not been born to English literate culture, for use by provincials like the Scots and colonials like the Americans. His book would later be used to educate native-born Englishmen as well.

The literate tradition that Blair thus rendered explicit, which largely persists to the present day, was by no means simply English in its origins. It contained material from Greece and Rome and from Europe. The index to his *Rhetoric* reads like a sampling from the pre-nineteenth-century part of a current index to American cultural literacy. Some items are:

|                |            |
|----------------|------------|
| Achilles       | Aristotle  |
| Adam           | Bacon      |
| Addison        | Berkeley   |
| Aeneid         | Caesar     |
| Aeschylus      | Cicero     |
| Aetna          | Cornelle   |
| Arabian Nights | King David |
| Aristophanes   | Dido       |



|             |                 |
|-------------|-----------------|
| Dryden      | Molière         |
| Euripides   | Odyssey         |
| Eve         | Oedipus         |
| Fielding    | Paradise Lost   |
| Job         | Pericles        |
| Helen       | Pindar          |
| Herodotus   | Plato           |
| Homer       | Pope            |
| Horace      | Racine          |
| Iliad       | Robinson Crusoe |
| Isaiah      | Rousseau        |
| Jeremiah    | Satan           |
| Dr. Johnson | Shakespeare     |
| Juvenal     | Solomon         |
| Livy        | Sophocles       |
| Locke       | Swift           |
| Longinus    | Tacitus         |
| Lucretius   | Thucydides      |
| Machavelli  | Virgil          |
| Milton      | Voltaire        |

For each of these items, and for many more, Blair conveyed the attitudes and associations that make up the lore of the literate tradition. For example, this is how he gave his readers the traditional range of views about Achilles:

Homer has been blamed for making his hero Achilles of too brutal and inamiable a character. But I am inclined to think that injustice is commonly done to Achilles, upon the credit of two lines of Horace, who has certainly overloaded his character.

Impiger, iracundus, inexorabilis, acer,  
Jura negat sibi nata; nihil non arrogat armis.

[Energetic, angry, inexorable, fierce, / He spurns the law, and respects only arms.]

Achilles is passionate indeed to a great degree; but he is far from being a contemner of laws and justice . . . Besides his

wonderful bravery and contempt of death, he has several other qualities of a Hero. He is open and sincere. He loves his subjects and respects the Gods. He is distinguished by strong friendships and attachments.<sup>32</sup>

And so on through two volumes and more than a thousand pages, each sentence of which conveyed commonly shared information that aspiring readers, writers, and speakers would do well to remember.

By the early twentieth century Blair was obsolete, not because of any defect in his presentation but because essential new elements not found in his book had come into literate culture during the nineteenth century, and some names had drifted into oblivion. Dickens and Hawthorne came in, Fenelon and Dr. Pitcairn went out. A reconstituted Blair could have served anywhere English was written and read. Yet no one in the United States created a revised Blair, because such a book would still have lacked the national dimension of cultural literacy.

In the nineteenth century we began to replace Blair with textbooks that attempted to create and transmit the mythology and values of the new country. In a study of American school materials of the nineteenth century, Ruth Miller Elson found an almost complete unanimity of values and emphases in our schoolbooks from 1790 to 1900.<sup>33</sup> They consistently contrasted virtuous and natural Americans with corrupt and decadent Europeans; they unanimously stressed love of country, love of God, obedience to parents, thrift, honesty, and hard work; and they continually insisted upon the perfection of the United States, the guardian of liberty and the destined redeemer of a sinful Europe.

Among the militant and self-conscious writers of these schoolbooks, the jingoistic Noah Webster was as typical as he was important. But although his spellers, readers, and dictionaries enjoyed uniquely large sales, they were not unique in any other respect. In fact, as Elson has shown, the contents of American schoolbooks of the nineteenth century were so similar and interchangeable that their creators might seem to have participated in a conspiracy to indoctrinate young Americans with commonly shared attitudes, including a fierce national loyalty and pride.<sup>34</sup>

One American culture maker who was driven by the aim of doing well by doing good was Mason Weems, the author of numerous popular works, including an edition of Franklin's *Autobiography* expanded by anecdotes, a "romanticized" life of General Francis Marion, and many popular tracts in support of virtuous living, early marriage, and the avoidance of strong drink. His chef-d'oeuvre and main contribution to the American tradition was his biography of George Washington, wherein could be found the original legend of the cherry tree.

We have more significant stories about Washington — for instance, the winter at Valley Forge — and more important traditions of national life. But the story of the cherry tree is a useful illustration of the way our national culture was formed. What were Weems's motivations in creating that durable piece of American folklore? His letters suggest that he was not consciously helping to form part of the tradition needed to weld Americans into a nation. He assumed that George Washington had already become part of American lore by virtue of the great offices he had held. He had been glorified unceasingly up and down the land in many a published oration and eulogy. Weems felt that these outpourings of official praise had turned Washington into an intimidating, distant personage, because they presented his life entirely in terms of generalship and statesmanship. No ordinary boy or girl could identify with such a demigod.

But since Americans had an infinite appetite for Washingtonian hagiography, and since no one had yet humanized Washington, Weems detected a market opportunity. As an itinerant book salesman, he knew that the public wanted a Washington who, while still mythic, was nonetheless human and private. Weems deduced that the public needed a domesticated Everyman whose life would serve as a model for American youth. He confided as much in the first pages of his biography.

However glorious, I say, all this [bravery and statesmanship] may have been to himself, or instructive to future generals and presidents, yet does it but *little* concern our *children*. For who among us can hope that his son shall ever be called, like Washington, to direct the storm of war, or to ravish the ears of deeply listening Senates? . . . Oh no! give us his *private* virtues!

In these every youth is interested, because in these every youth may become a Washington — a Washington in piety and patriotism, — in industry and honour — and consequently a Washington in what alone deserves the name, SELF ESTEEM and UNIVERSAL RESPECT.<sup>35</sup>

Characteristically, some of the most persistent elements of our national lore owe their longevity to human universality rather than conscious political design: Lincoln in his log cabin, Washington in his father's garden. The stories of Weems have outlived those of Webster. There could hardly be a more attractive tale than the one which portrays for the delight of children a parent who happily forgives a wayward child (for what child does not feel wayward?) and for parents a model who, in the most charming possible way, persuades young people to tell the truth.

George, said his father, *do you know who killed that beautiful little cherry-tree yonder in the garden?* This was a *tough question*; and George staggered under it for a moment; but quickly recovered himself: and looking at his father, with the sweet face of youth brightened with the inexpressible charm of all-conquering truth, he bravely cried out, *I can't tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet.*<sup>36</sup>

If this legend had been left to languish in Weems's book, it might have been forgotten. For the sober later biographers of Washington, anxious to discriminate between fact and what Weems openly called romance, were successful in discrediting Weems's book, the popularity of which waned greatly in the later nineteenth century. But with a sure instinct, the compilers of textbooks took up the Weems stories. McGuffey included a sterner version of the cherry-tree episode in his *Second Eclectic Reader* and thus assured it a place in many other readers, and in our permanent lore.

Abraham Lincoln relates in his *Autobiography* how he educated himself by carefully reading and rereading a few books . . . Weems's *Life of Washington*, the Bible, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin (possibly the expanded version by Weems), Paine's *Age of Reason*, and Volney's *Ruins*.<sup>37</sup>

This typical frontier education itself became part of American national mythology after Lincoln's assassination. In the Lincoln story as narrated inside and outside the school, Americans continue to ideal of a peculiarly American education, in which the reading of a few central books could yield virtue, patriotism, and pride. As Lawrence A. Cremin notes,

The Lincoln of folklore had a significance even beyond the Lincoln of actuality. For the Lincoln of folklore embodied what ordinary inarticulate Americans cherished as ideals. Put otherwise, if the Lincoln of actuality imbibed the American *paideia* [i.e., our traditional scheme of education], the Lincoln of folklore personified it, and in reflecting it back on education writ large, helped transmit it to successive generations of Americans.<sup>38</sup>

The Washington and Lincoln legends might have developed differently, just as the spelling of the word *doubt* might have. In the early stages of a nation's life, its traditions are in flux. But with the passage of time, traditions that have been recorded in a nation's printed books and transmitted in its education system become fixed in the national memory. They become known by so many people over so long a time that they enter the oral and written tradition, where they tend to remain through generations. Consequently, these early traditions are not easy to change. Important legends, names, and events become fixed by constant usage, just as spellings do.

But the analogy with spelling and grammar is only partial. Our national culture resembles a vocabulary more than a system of grammar and spelling. And the vocabulary of a culture, like that of a language, is open to change. All languages are linguistically progressive. That is, they tend to shorten words that are used frequently. For instance, TV will probably slowly supplant *television*, and *phone*, *telephone*.<sup>39</sup> Coinages come into the cultural lexicon, and old words drop out or get expelled. Sometimes entirely new objects or events must be named. Occasionally it is possible to change our vocabulary by acts of common will, as we are changing it to remove racism and sexism in language.

But the occurrence, and more rarely the introduction, of specific change into our vocabulary has led some to believe, erroneously, that our culture can be remade on a large scale by an act of common will. This is a false and damaging myth. Rapid, large-scale change is no more possible in the sphere of national culture than in the sphere of national language. It is no more desirable or practicable to drop biblical and legendary allusions from our culture than to drop the letter *s* from the third person singular.

The traditional materials of national culture can be learned by all citizens only if the materials are taught in a nation's schools. But to teach them, the schools must have access to books that explain them — dictionaries like Johnson's and indexes to cultural literacy like Blair's. Because such compendia help outsiders enter mainstream literate culture, works like Blair's and Johnson's are socially progressive instruments, despite the fact that they contain traditional materials. Like everything that helps to spread literate language and culture, a nation's dictionaries, including those of cultural literacy, have helped to overcome class distinctions and barriers to opportunity. Historically, they have had a liberalizing and democratic effect. *a. l. c. makes everyone with the same*

But these benefits of national literate culture will be lost if we take our cultural traditions and national language too much for granted. It is all too easy for us to make this mistake, because of our history. When our nation began, we did not experience the bloody animosities and social dislocations that followed the imposition of national languages in France, Spain, and Britain and that are now following the same process in Russia. Fortunately, we inherited a standard written language that by 1776 had become normalized in grammar, spelling, and pronunciation. Our ancient charters, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, were written in a language that is current more than two hundred years later — a remarkable fact that we too easily take for granted when we read them. We remain happily unaware of the political struggles that usually accompanied the establishment of a national language. The Scots and Irish and Welsh did not begin to speak English because they believed it to be superior to their own language. The work of standardizing our language had been done for us long ago in

His my. People need to know cultural literacy... this is why we discuss it. We discuss it because we don't discuss it.

such bloody, faraway battles as Flodden, Worcester, and Drogheda and in numerous decades of work by English scholars and schoolmasters.

Our only experience of civil strife over the language was a temporary truce in a teapot called the war of the dictionaries. Joseph Worcester of Massachusetts and Noah Webster of Connecticut argued over such towering questions as whether the *a* in *grass* should be pronounced like the "grabs" of a British lawn or the *grass* of the boundless prairies, or whether the word for honest work should be spelled *labour* as in Britain or *labor* as befits the land of opportunity and equality. Worcester, the conservative, wanted to follow British practice in everything. Webster, representing the spirit of national pride and independence, wanted to introduce an American flavor in pronunciation and spelling. Worcester's loyalty to Britain in the matter was unpopular and found acceptance only in a few places, notably Harvard and the University of Virginia; elsewhere in the land, Noah Webster's dictionary was victorious.<sup>40</sup>

Our fortunate inexperience of bloodshed over language may explain why some of us look with equanimity upon recent proposals favoring multilingualism in our country. Defenders of linguistic pluralism invite us to look to Switzerland, not realizing that Switzerland has achieved multilingualism (as distinct from multilingualism through a small, intensive, centralized educational system that, coupled with universal military service, enables the Swiss to communicate with one another despite their linguistic handicaps. Moreover, they have achieved this only after hundreds of years of blood conflict between the Swiss cantons. In fact, there are good reasons why no large nation has been able to imitate Switzerland. The examples of Belgium and Canada are not encouraging.

In America the reality is that we have not yet properly achieved monoliteracy, much less multiliteracy.<sup>41</sup> Because of the demand created by technology we need effective monoliteracy more than ever. Linguistic pluralism would make sense for us only on the questionable assumption that our civil peace and national effectiveness could survive multilingualism. But in fact, multilingualism enormously increases cultural fragmentation, civil antagonism, illiteracy, and economic-technological ineffectualness. These are the very disabilities the Chinese are attempting to overcome.

National languages are not ethnic media. Each one is an elaborate

composite contrived to overcome local and ethnic dialectal variations inside a large nation.<sup>42</sup> It is contrary to the purpose and essence of a national language, whether English or German or Spanish or French, that a modern nation should deliberately encourage more than one to flourish within its borders. Once a national language is permanently fixed in grammars, schoolbooks, and dictionaries, and used in millions of books, magazines, and newspapers, it becomes, except for its vocabulary, an immovable, almost unchanging substance. When two great standard literate languages like English and Spanish, or English and French, coexist inside a nation, neither can yield to the other except by strife or vigorous intervention in the educational system.

In considering bilingualism in America, we should therefore understand that well-meaning linguistic pluralism, which would encourage rather than discourage competing languages within our borders, is much different from Jeffersonian pluralism, which has encouraged a diversity of traditions, values, and opinions. Tolerance of diversity is at the root of our society, but encouragement of multilingualism is contrary to our traditions and extremely unrealistic. Defenders of multilingualism should not assume that our Union has been preserved once and for all by the Civil War, and that we can afford to disdain the cultural and educational vigilance exercised by other modern nations. To think so complacently is to show a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of national literacy in creating and sustaining modern civilization.

This book is not, of course, directly concerned with the question of bilingualism. But I know that well-meaning bilingualism could unwittingly erect serious barriers to cultural literacy among our young people and therefore create serious barriers to universal literacy at a mature level. I am opposed neither to *biliteracy* nor to the learning of foreign languages. I am strongly in favor of both. In the best of worlds, all Americans would be multiliterate. But surely the first step in that direction must be for all of us to become literate in our own national language and culture.

is it?  
Yes, you're  
right. That  
we have  
the class  
is correct.