## Glottopolitics: The Power of Language

*Abstract:*

*This article develops the notion of glottopolitics, its evolution, and the reasons behind its necessary inclusion in the study and analysis of conflicts. To this end, three situations in which language is involved in political confrontation are discussed: the mobilizing power of language, its role as a multiplying factor, and its importance as a tool for conflict resolution.*

*Keywords:*

*Glottopolitics, language, conflict, mobilization, escalation, resolution.*

## Introduction

Language plays a key role as a representative element of a culture. It has been, and still is, a weapon of immeasurable power, both in its verbal and symbolic dimensions. It is thus closely linked to the emergence and development of conflicts.

The neologisms that find their way into the lexicon of the languages of states involved in conflict are a clear manifestation of how languages are influenced by the national and international context in which they are used. Recent examples of conflicts that generated new words or altered the meaning of pre-existing ones are relatively common.

During World War II, for example, new terms permeated most European languages. In the case of the Spanish language we find German words, such as "Nazi" and Japanese words such as "kamikaze". Originally considered foreign words, they have since been incorporated into the dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy (Real Academia Española)[1][2]. Without them, it would be impossible to fully comprehend the conflict and its development, both in Europe and in the Pacific. Similar effects on language can be seen in intrastate conflicts as well, even when both sides speak the same language. In Rwanda, for example, the term "inyenzi" (cockroach in Kinyarwanda, the first language of over 90% of the population) now holds deeper meaning than before it was used in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, who were identified with this term as part of the process of dehumanization that led to actual extermination[3].

The last few decades have seen the development of a key tool for the study of the linguistic dimension of conflict: the glottopolitical approach. The topic has been discussed by American academics such as Robert Hall[4] or Einar Haugen[5], as well as by French academics, such as Jean-Baptiste Marcellesi and Louis Guespin[6], but it remains

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[1] Real Academia Española (2014) "Nazi". In *Diccionario de la lengua española* (23rd Ed.). Available at http://dle.rae.es/?id=QJXdz2Q. Accessed 23.01.2019.

[2] Real Academia Española (2014) "Kamikaze". In Diccionario de la lengua española (23rd Ed.). Available at http://dle.rae.es/?id=MfqRZnn. Accessed 23.01.2019.

[3] JORGENSEN, C. M. *A Case Study Analysis of Dehumanization in Rwanda and Darfur*. NSU Florida: 2016, Department of Conflict Resolution Studies.

[4] HALL, R. American Linguistics, 1925-1950. *Archivum Linguisticum, 3*, 1951, pp. 101-125.

[5] HAUGEN, E. *The Ecology of Language*, Stanford University Press, 1971, pp. 325-339.

[6] GUESPIN, L., & MARCELLESI, J. B. Pour la glottopolitique. *Langages, 83*, 1986, pp. 5-34.

particularly absent in the Spanish academic sphere. It is nonetheless a remarkably useful approach, as language policy competences are often a political priority, both in terms of what languages are used in State territory and in terms of how they are used. This article aims to show the relevance of the glottopolitical approach, as well as to argue for the necessary incorporation of the linguistic dimension in conflict studies in order to fully understand the inner workings of each clash. In order to do so, the evolution of the concept of glottopolitics is briefly recounted, followed by the presentation of three lines of conflict study, all of which draw from the glottopolitical approach: the mobilizing power of language, its role as a multiplying factor, and its importance in peace processes and conflict resolution in general.

## Evolution and Definition of the Glottopolitical Approach

The increased interest in language and culture contact corresponds to a line of research that has traditionally fallen to fields such as Linguistics, Philosophy and Anthropology. Nonetheless, due to the current process of globalization and to the fact that migrations motivated by political, economic, or other safety-related reasons are being given increasingly more importance, the study of the connections between language and politics is beginning to be pursued by scholars in the field of International Relations.

The study of language as a political tool is not particularly new. Much has been written about the expansion of the Roman Empire throughout Europe, which was accompanied by a process of Latinization of the areas where Romans settled, at the expense of the languages previously spoken in those regions[7]. Studies on the expansion of the Spanish language in the New World or of English and French throughout most of Asia and Africa as a result of the colonizing efforts of the European metropolises are also abundant. The term "glottopolitics", however, was barely used until 1986, when sociolinguists Jean-Baptiste Marcellesi and Louis Guespin published their paper "Pour la Glottopolitique"[8], in which it was established that the concept would encompass political events with repercussions as regards language, and *vice versa*. The term had previously been used

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[7] FERNÁNDEZ JAÉN, J. *El latín en Hispania: la romanización de la Península Ibérica. El latín vulgar. Particularidades del latín hispánico.* Alicante: 2006, Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes.

[8] GUESPIN, L., & MARCELLESI, J.B., op., cit.

by authors such as Robert Hall[9], in 1951, and Einar Haugen[10], in 1971, to refer to the branch of Applied Linguistics that studies government management of situations in which two or more languages come into contact, always emphasizing the institutional component. However, the use of the term did not solidify until the French tradition inaugurated by Marcellesi and Guespin began to spread and, with it, so did the definition of glottopolitics provided by these authors.

Elvira Narvaja de Arnoux, from the University of Buenos Aires, provided further precision to the concept through the publication of a chronological study of the glottopolitical approach. In this study, included in her paper "La glotopolítica: transformaciones de un campo disciplinario"[11] (Glottopolitics: transformations of a field of discipline), the role of linguistic planning, decolonization, and the rise of regional integration in the evolution of the glottopolitical approach are underlined. The definition of glottopolitics is also expanded to include not only the policies that aim to regulate the linguistic profile of a community, but also the role of language in building the social order and in the distribution of power. Arnoux cooperates actively with the glottopolitical studies group that emerged in 2002 in the City University of New York (CUNY). The main focus of the latter is on investigating the relationship between forms of language and the social identities they demarcate. This brings us to the current stage in the evolution of the concept of glottopolitics, a sub-discipline of Linguistics centred on the study of political events with a linguistic basis and on the proposal, whenever possible, of solutions generally based on language policy[12].

The importance of the glottopolitical approach in academia resides in the role of language as an essential part of culture and as the main tool of interaction between these cultures and the individuals that constitute them. Language is thus also a key element in the creation of linguistic divides that mark the separation of groups of people based on their first or preferred language. This shows the importance of addressing the glottopolitical

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[9] HALL, R., op., cit.

[10] HAUGEN, E., op., cit.

[11] ARNOUX, E. N. La Glotopolítica: transformaciones de un campo disciplinario. In AA.VV. (Ed.), *Lenguajes, teorías y prácticas* (pp. 95-109). Buenos Aires: 2010, Instituto Superior del Profesorado Dr. Joaquín V. González

[12] DEL VALLE, J. Glotopolítica y teoría del lenguaje.: la perspectiva glotopolítica y la normatividad. *Anuario de Glotopolítica, 1*, 2017, pp. 17-39.

dimension of conflicts, as well as the potential that this approach to the characteristics of a conflict has for the study of such clashes, but also for their resolution and prevention. The glottopolitical approach thus becomes a very important tool in Security Studies.

**The Mobilizing Power of Language**

Despite the constant presence of the communicative role of language in conflict, its symbolic role as the emblem of an identity is perhaps even more relevant. The importance of the symbolic function of language becomes especially apparent in the context of contact linguistics, in which the choice of, or loyalty to, a specific language conveys an underlying message that can be used by both senders and recipients to further the pursuit of specific objectives[13].

When a conflict is based on national, ethnic, racial or religious identities, the symbolic role of language allows members of either party to establish whether an individual or group is a friend or a foe. Without this division, it would be impossible to determine who is to be the target of each attack. Language differences have become a criterion used to this end and, consequently, as an indicator of limits between groups and an intrinsic element of "us vs them" rhetoric[14].

These divisions take place both at the internal and at the external level of many groups. Within a collective of individuals who speak the same language, differences in register, dialect or accents can betray the social group to which the speaker belongs. As for the external level, and perhaps the more important one in the study of conflicts, affiliation with a specific identity can be shown through the use of terms specific of a particular sociocultural reality, as they are used to describe events that only take place in the context of a specific group, such as the names of traditions, religious practices or specific ways of engaging with the natural world[15]. The term "Pachamama", for example, describes an Inca deity which is still worshiped in areas of South America of strong Quechua or Aymara

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[13] SULEIMAN, Y. *A War of Words: Language and Conflict in the Middle East.* Cambridge Middle East Studies, Vol. 19. Cambridge: 2004, Cambridge University Press.

[14] CARGILE, A., GILES, H., & CLÉMENT, R. Language, Conflict, and ethnolinguistic identity theory. *Human Social Conflict*, 1995, pp. 198-208.

[15] PEINADO SERRANO, P. *Language and Conflict: The Case of Ukraine*. Universidad Pontificia Comillas, 2018.

influence. In other areas of the region, although it may no longer be venerated, it is very present in local culture. In Peru, for example, "Pachamama" appears often in the national narrative[16]. However, it is a relatively unknown term in other Spanish-speaking areas, such as Spain, so any speakers of the language that use terms such as this one, which describes a reality foreign to Spanish culture, would be easily excluded from the group of those perceived as affiliated to the Spanish identity.

By applying the glottopolitical approach to language as an indicator of the limits of group identity, it is also possible to see how a nationalist movement might establish a correlation between a group and a national identity with the aim of furthering the achievement of its objectives[17]. When defining a nation as an imagined community, Benedict Anderson[18] notes that the existence of a nation is often imagined through language, thus emphasizing the role of language in the process of formation of said communities and, subsequently, in the resulting national identity. This point of view opens up the possibility of using the "national" language as the main link between members of a nation, especially if they are dispersed throughout different states, and as a way of legitimizing the enlargement of the nation through the incorporation of all those who speak the corresponding language, or even of all the territories in which these individuals live[19]. This is seen, for example, in how the differentiating features of the Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian languages have been emphasized since the breakup of Yugoslavia, where the Serbo-Croatian language was used. Serbo-Croatian was the result of the combination of the languages used in the region in order to obtain a single language which would be used in the whole territory[20]. The independence of the republics that made up the territory of Yugoslavia highlighted the need to show that the languages that corresponded to each of the newly-independent nations were different, and so a series of differentiation processes ensued, the most

[16] HILL, M. "Inca of the Blood, Inca of the Soul". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion.* *76* (2): 2008, pp. 251–279.

[17] DROOGSMA, M. *The effect of the violent conflict in Ukraine on language use and language attitudes.* MA Thesis, 2017.

[18] ANDERSON, B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism.* London: 1983, Verso.

[19] KAMUSELLA, T. D. I. Language as an instrument of nationalism in Central Europe. *Nations and Nationalism*, 7(2), 2001.

[20] KORDIĆ, S.. *Lengua y Nacionalismo.* Translated by Juan Cristóbal Díaz Beltrán. Madrid: 2014, Euphonía Ediciones.

intense of which was applied to the Croatian language. Archaisms and neologisms were introduced, and intense purist tendencies emerged. In Serbia, where differentiation took a more moderate form, the new Constitution of 2006 established Cyrillic script as official, although until that time the Latin alphabet had been used at official and government levels. Lastly, Bosnian speakers have managed to differentiate their language from Serbian and Croatian by introducing loanwords of Turkish and Arabic origins[21].



**Figure 1: Areas in which the majority language is a variant of Serbo-Croatian**
Source: Landesinstitut für Schule und Medien Berlin-Brandenburg (2016)

The secessionist movement in Quebec is another relevant example, as the defence of Quebec French, a majority language in the region but a minority language at the national level, is often cited as one of the main objectives of pro-independence groups.

In the same way that a "national" language can be used to determine who belongs to a group, it is also possible to use it as a tool for the exclusion from the nation of those who have limited or no knowledge of it. In extreme cases, the language of exclusion becomes a tool of dehumanization, so that it not only excludes certain individuals from a group or nation, but also marks them as inferior beings. For example, before the country of Sudan was divided in two and South Sudan was born, the non-Muslim population, victims of the massacres carried out by the Janjaweed militias, were singled out because they spoke

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[21] MUNJIN, B. (2007) *¿Serbio, croata o serbocroata?* Entrevista al prestigioso lingüista Ranko Bugarski. Available at http://impedimentatransit.blogspot.com/2010/06/serbio-croata-o-serbocroata.html. Accessed 30.01.2019.

tribal languages, rather than Arabic ones, or spoke Juba Arabic instead of Sudanese Arabic[22]. Dehumanization is a process that commonly takes place prior to the extermination stage of a genocide[23], so a glottopolitical approach could allow for the detection of such tell-tale signs, which would make it far easier to intervene before extermination actually takes place.

**Language as a Multiplying Factor**

The study of the causal factors of conflicts is a key part of the field of Security Studies. Although a universally valid conclusion has yet to be reached, many different manners of classifying the causes of conflict have in fact been proposed. Most include, in general terms, three large categories which, according to the nomenclature provided by Rafael Grasa[24], are: structural factors (underlying causes without which there can be no conflict), multiplying factors (those which lead to opinion radicalization and, potentially, to violence), and triggering factors (the breaking point, with which conflict erupts).

Traditionally, authors such as Hidemi Suganimi[25] have underlined structural factors, as the fact that no conflict can take place without them leads to the conclusion that, by eliminating all elements in this category, we could potentially eliminate conflict altogether. However, multiplying factors are also of great importance, both before and during a conflict. Prior to the appearance of the triggering element, multiplying factors will foster polarization based on pre-existing divisive issues (that is, structural factors) until the opposing parties reach the conclusion that recourse to violence is the only possible solution. Multiplying factors are thus the ones to blame for conflict escalation to extremely destructive levels, as well as their persistence at such levels despite the great sacrifices that this entails for all involved parties[26].

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[22] NATSIOS, A. S. *Sudan, South Sudán, & Darfur*. Oxford: 2012, Oxford University Press.

[23] STANTON, G. H. *The Ten Stages of Genocide*, 2016. Available at http://genocidewatch.net/genocide-2/8-stages-of-genocide/. Accessed 30/01/2019.

[24] GRASA, R. La lengua y la identidad, factores de paz o de conflictividad violenta. *Conflictos lingüísticos 21*, 2014, ICIP.

[25] SUGANIMI, H. *On the causes of war: a foundation for a future study*. In Salmon, T. C. and Imber, M. F. (Eds) Issues in International Relations. London: 2005, Routledge.

[26] KRIESBERG, L. *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution*. Maryland, E.E. U.U.: 2007, Rowman & Littlefield.

This is therefore the category that explains conflict dynamics and warring party behaviour, which renders it a key element when it comes to studying and understanding a specific conflict. It is also the category in which Grasa chooses to include linguistic factors[27], attaching to them the corresponding importance. He argues that, because linguistic diversity fosters the appearance of perceptions of inequality vis-à-vis individuals belonging to a different linguistic group, it exacerbates existing tensions and fosters both potentially and actually violent situations. This perceived inequality is securitized, which is possible because, as has already been established, language is a key component and determinant of identity and, when the inequalities suffered are attributed to the use of the language associated with the group identity, they can be perceived as a threat to said identity and, consequently, to the very survival of the group that shares said identity.
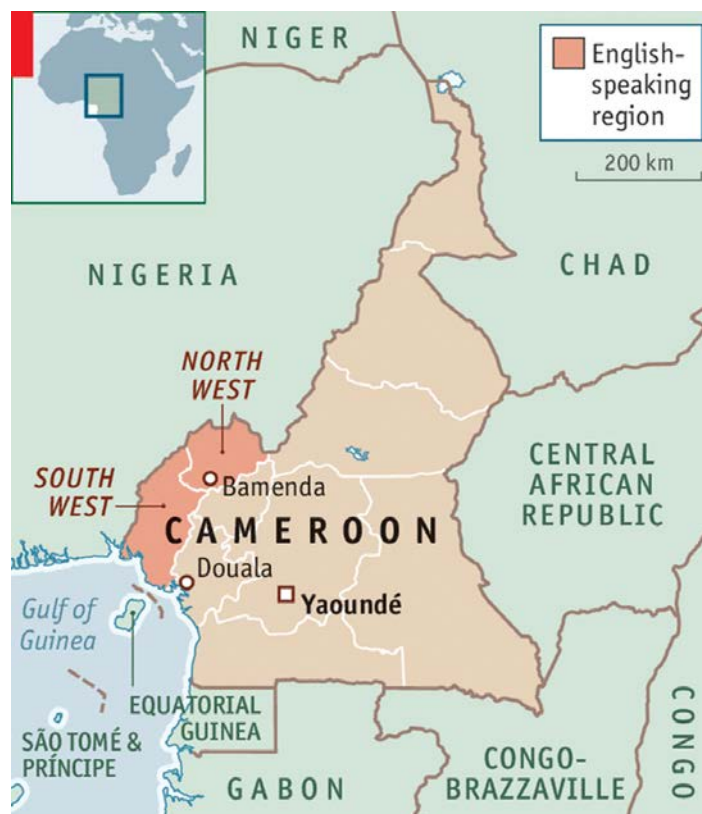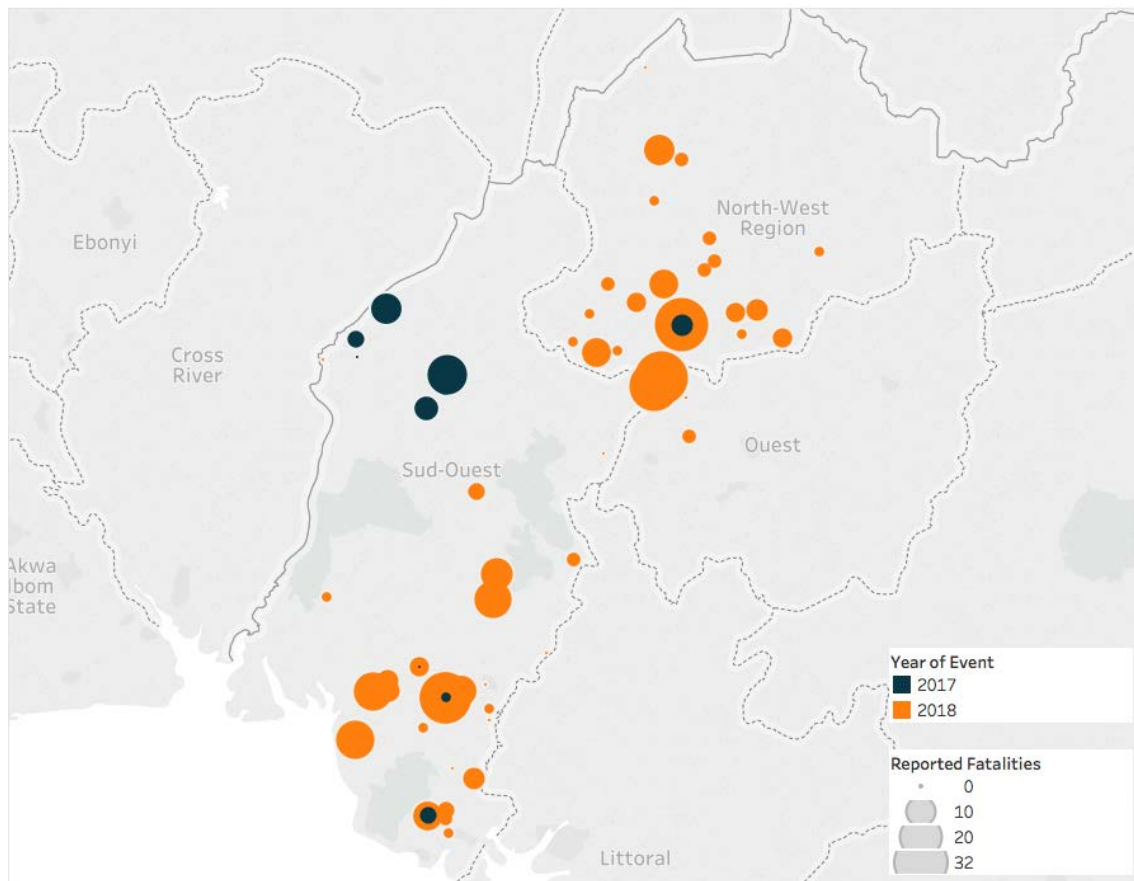


**Figure 2: Anglophone areas of Cameroon.**
Source: Institut Canadien des Affaires Mondiales (2018)

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[27] GRASA, R., op., cit.

The current situation in Cameroon eloquently exemplifies the multiplying nature of language. More than 240 indigenous languages are spoken within its borders, along with French, English, and a lingua franca: Cameroonian Pidgin English[28]. As a result of its colonial past, during which modern-day Cameroon was divided between France and Great Britain, the division between anglophone and francophone Cameroon is clearly visible still today.



**Figure 3: Cases of political violence in the anglophone region of Cameroon between January 1, 2017, and September 9, 2018.** Source: ACLED (2018) https://www.acleddata.com/2018/09/21/picking-a-fight-the-rise-of-armed-separatists-in-cameroon/.

Tensions appeared during the decolonization process and were exacerbated when the federal system established after independence was substituted with a centralized state system[29]. The result was an uneven distribution of the use of the two official languages

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[28] ECHU, G. The Language Question in Cameroon. *Linguistik Online*, *18*(1), 2013.

[29] UK PARLIAMENT. Briefing paper 8331, 6 June 2018, "The Anglophone Cameroon crisis". Available at https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8331. Accessed 06.02.2019

that privileged French and, consequently, the population of the francophone regions, which include both a larger territory and a larger percent of the population than the anglophone regions. This led to the creation of a perception of inequality related to language and, consequently, to the identity of English-speaking Cameroonians, who feel marginalized both in political and economic issues. The multiplying effects of the linguistic-related inequality are already being felt: since 2017, a significant increase in violence has taken place in Cameroon, especially in anglophone territory[30], and the initial, relatively peaceful protests have given way to a clear secessionist movement armed with its own militia, which has already faced off in multiple occasions with the national army[31].

It is impossible to understand the emergence and escalation of this type of conflicts without taking the linguistic dimension into account, for which the glottopolitical approach is the perfect tool. This approach can be used to detect the intervention of language as a multiplying factor, as it emphasizes the relationship between the significant increase in violence that has taken place in Cameroon in the last few years with the inequality between groups with language-defined identities. The glottopolitical approach thus shows the depth and complexity of the link between linguistics and violent conflict.

**Language as a Tool for Conflict Resolution**

According to Chilton[32], communication is not only closely linked to the presence of violent confrontations, but also equally connected to conflict resolution processes. Following a study on the relationship between language, identity, and social conflict, Brown and Ganguly[33] concluded that, in the vast majority of societies plagued by conflict, linguistic policies are little more than a string of disasters generated by the tendency of local elites to adopt policies that promote their own interests and are damaging for poor, rural, and

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[30] IZQUIERDO ALBERCA, M.J. *Camerún: elecciones y conflicto territorial*. Documento análisis, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2018.

[31] MATFESS, H. *Picking a Fight: The Rise of Armed Separatists in Cameroon.* ACLED, 2018. Available at https://www.acleddata.com/2018/09/21/picking-a-fight-the-rise-of-armed-separatists-in-cameroon/. Accessed 06.02.2019.

[32] CHILTON, P. A. "The Role of Language in Human Conflict: Prolegomena to the Investigation of Language as a Factor in Conflict Causation and Resolution". *Current Issues in Language and Society 4*(3), 2010, pp. 174-189.

[33] BROWN, M. E., & GANGULY, S. *Fighting words: Language policy & ethnic relations in Asia.* Cambridge, MA: 2003, The MIT Press.

ethnic communities. Grasa[34] remarked that, due to the high frequency with which linguistic factors are present in confrontations, they also play a key role in the negotiations between actors involved in conflicts with an important identity load. The recognition of linguistic diversity and the creation of mechanisms for its protection are usually among the easiest objectives to agree on during peace negotiations, as their implementation is easier to supervise.

An example of linguistic recognition as part of a peace process was the granting of official status to Bantu languages in South Africa. During the apartheid era, only English and Afrikaans were official languages, although nine Bantu languages enjoyed certain promotion by the Government. This was part of a divide-and-conquer strategy through which the Afrikaans-speaking white population divided the black population between smaller, self-managed territories, each of which had the corresponding Bantu language as official. Policies were implemented by which the first few years of schooling were to be strictly mother tongue instruction, so that each of these smaller regions provided education in their official language, thus distancing themselves from each other[35]. However, after the 1994 reforms that culminated in the new South African democracy, the 1996 Constitution established the nine Bantu languages that had been the basis of the apartheid linguistic policies as official languages at a national level, along with English and Afrikaans, as well as establishing different regulatory bodies, such as the South African Language Board in 1995 or the Language Plan Task Group, better known as LANGTAG, which advises and assists the Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology on issues relating to language[36]. The glottopolitical approach would thus be particularly useful in understanding the role of linguistic-policy-based solutions in the post-apartheid healing process.

Nonetheless, recognition of linguistic minorities is not always a possibility. In situations where the State is weaker and minorities enjoy relatively more strength, such recognition may lead to civil wars or many other manners of intrastate conflict[37]. This was the case

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[34] GRASA, R., op., cit.

[35] BRENZINGER, M. Eleven Official Languages and More: Legislation and Language Policies in South Africa. *Journal of Language and Law* 67, 2017, pp. 38-54.

[36] ALEXANDER, N. Language Policy and Planning in the New South Africa. *African Sociological Review, 1*(1), 1997, pp. 82-92.

[37] LAITIN D. *Language Policy and Civil War* en VAN PARIJS, P. (Ed.) Cultural Diversity versus Economic

in Sri Lanka, for example, where a series of laws passed in 1956 sought to establish Sinhalese, which corresponds to the Sinhalese ethnic majority group in Sri Lanka, as the only official language of the country. The regions where ethnically Tamil groups and, consequently, the Tamil language, predominated responded with great outrage, and the subsequent unrest led to the elevation of Tamil to official status in the 1978 Constitution.

In the following years, the Sri Lankan civil war began to take shape as the separatist group known as the Tamil Tigers surged forward. It would not end until the Tamil Tigers were defeated in 2009[38].



**Figure 4: Distribution of Tamil-Majority Areas.** Source: Le Monde Diplomatique (2010)[39]

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Solidarity: Proceedings of the Seventh Francqui Colloquium, Brussels, 28 February – 1 March 2003. Brussels: 2004, de Boeck.

[38] BAJORIA, J. *The Sri Lankan Conflict.* Council on Foreign Relations, 2009. Available at https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/sri-lankan-conflict. Accessed 12.02.2019.

[39] GOUVERNEUR, C. *La gran angustia de los tamiles de Sri Lanka.* Le Monde Diplomatique, 2010.

Tamil-Sinhalese tensions are still a prominent part of the socio-political picture in Sri Lanka. However, initiatives have emerged that use languages to foster tolerance and reconciliation. The Janakaraliya theatre group is one of them. Founded in 2002, when separatist violence was still rampant, this nomadic group performs in both Tamil and Sinhalese, adapting their plays to the theatrical traditions of both ethnic collectives, thus creating a comfortable neutral space between them that promotes mutual understanding[40]. They seek to heal Sri Lankan war wounds though cultural interaction, which takes place thanks to the multilingual nature of their activities[41].

Thus, we see that linguistics are not just fundamental in order to understand the nature of a conflict, but can in fact be key when working towards peace, both during the negotiation stages, as was the case of South Africa, and during the healing process, as in the case of Sri Lanka. The glottopolitical approach allows for the study of the effectiveness of these tools in peace processes, which would facilitate their use in future peace dialogues.

**Conclusion**

The role played by linguistic factors in conflicts has yet to be studied in depth. This Is largely due to the disconnection between the fields of Political Science and Sociolinguistics[42]. Incorporating the glottopolitical approach to the field of Security Studies would narrow the gap between these fields of study, thus compensating for the aforementioned dearth. Knowledge of the linguistic dimension of a conflict can be key in determining how the conflicting parts are formed through the mobilizing power of language and in explaining the escalation of conflicts through the study of its securitization and its multiplying nature. Furthermore, it can greatly aid peace process negotiation and peace-pursuing policy implementation. The communicative and symbolic power of language make it a unique tool that is being passed over due to its absence in academic

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Available at https://mondiplo.com/la-gran-angustia-de-los-tamiles-de-sri-lanka. Accessed 20.02.2019.

[40] PEACE INSIGHT. *Janakaraliya*. 2016. Available at https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/sri-lanka/peacebuilding-organisations/janakaraliya/. Accessed 12.02.2019.

[41] POUSO, M. T. "El teatro reconcilia a tamiles y cingaleses en Sri Lanka". *El País*, 2018. Available at https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/04/09/planeta_futuro/1523265574_732211.html. Accessed 12.02.2019

[42] MEDEIROS, M. The language of conflict: The relationship between linguistic vitality and conflict intensity. *Ethnicities, 17*(5), 2015, pp. 627–645.

studies. The incorporation of the glottopolitical approach in Security Studies would allow its use to reduce the number of existing conflicts and, if used correctly, to act as an early prevention mechanism, so as to fully avoid the havoc wreaked by conflicts on states and their inhabitants.

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