

Chapter 2: The history of the theory of pluricentricity

In this section, I will show how the concept of pluricentricity of languages has developed since the 1950s. It will also look at similar developments in the centuries before.

1. Early attempts of codification of non-dominant varieties of post colonial pluricentric languages

Prior to the establishment of the theory of pluricentric languages in the 1950-1990s, there had already been a considerable number of attempts to codify the language of countries that emerged from the dissolution of empires or countries that lost substantial parts of colonial territories, which in some places lead to new languages.

Two cases stand out in particular: the collapse of the Spanish Empire in the Americas and the collapse of the British Empire around the globe. The dissolution of the Spanish Empire already started in 1648 with the independence of the Spanish Netherlands – now the Netherlands– that led to the foundation of Dutch when it split from German and became an independent language in its own right. The Austrian Netherlands were lost in 1714 and became Luxembourg and Belgium.

The Spanish American wars of independence in the early 19th century led to the dissolution of the Spanish Empire in Central and South America and to the loss of all 18 Spanish territories all over the Americas. Within a period of 14 years beginning in 1810, a total of 18 Spanish colonies in Central and South America became independent after Spain lost several wars of independence.¹ However, the new nations retained Spanish as their national language. Around 50 years later, the establishment of Spanish language academies started in several of the new nations: Colombia (1871); Ecuador (1871); Mexico (1874); El Salvador (1875); Venezuela (1876); Chile (1883); Peru (1885); Guatemala (1887).

This led to the publication of a considerable number of differential dictionaries by the end of the 19th century: Cuba (1862), Guatemala (1882), Peru (1884), Costa Rica (1893), Honduras (1895), Mexico (1899), Chile (1901), Bolivia (1906), Argentina (1911). However, the majority of these dictionaries considered the national features of Spanish in South America as “*barbarisms*” that should be avoided at all costs.² These dictionaries were not created in

order to “build away”³ the American varieties of Spanish from Spanish Spanish but rather to fight any tendency of linguistic self-determination of the new nations. It was only in 2010 with the publication of the “*Diccionario de americanismos*” - a joint work of all 21 Spanish academies - when this attitude came to an end.

The demise of the Portuguese Empire already began in the 18th and 19th centuries. Important events were the independence of *Brazil* in 1822 and the end of the colonial area of Portugal with the independence of *Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, São Tomé e Príncipe and East Timor* in 1974/1975. These countries retained Portuguese as their first or second national language. Dictionaries of Portuguese and grammars of varieties outside Portugal were only published in Brazil but as early as the end of the 19th century: Ribeiro (1890), Maciel (1887), Gomes (1887). These dictionaries too showed a clear preference for the national norm.⁴

With the American Revolution and Declaration of Independence of the United States in 1776, English became a pluricentric language. Not long after that historical event, the differences between British English and US English became apparent. This resulted in the publication of Webster’s first dictionary in 1806 with its enlarged version in 1844.⁵ However, unlike the attitude of the Spanish dictionaries in the New World, the Webster dictionary introduced a number of differentiating features that persist to this day. Webster clearly sought to differentiate American English from British English in order to underpin the newly founded American nation. In the English speaking world there are no language academies as there are in Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking countries. The norm setting in English is mainly carried out by dictionary editors. There are a number of dictionaries for the major varieties of English: Australia: *Macquarie Dictionary*; Canada (1981); *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (1998); New Zealand: *Oxford Dictionary of New Zealand English* (1997); *A dictionary of South African English: Home language* (1998). They follow a moderate endonormative attitude.

The French Empire comprised around 80 colonies over the course of its history. Most of them were situated in West and Central Africa and in Asia. Many of the colonies became independent already in the 1950s. However, 1960 was the year, in which 12 French colonies in West Africa became independent: *Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo*.

It is important to note that the first French dictionary published outside

France was Dunn's *Glossaire franco-canadien* of (1880), in which francophone Canadians showed how their variety of French differed from the one in France. No other variety of French outside France produced dictionaries before the early 1980s. The exonormative attitude that was typical for all attempts to codify national varieties outside the “mother variety” in the 19th and most of the 20th century was clearly influenced by the colonial situation that prevailed at that time in most parts of the world. The Canadian Encyclopaedia states the same for French in pointing out that “... since the first appearance of the conservative and prescriptive *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* in 1694, there has been a trend towards marginalisation of varieties of French from outside France”.⁶ French is the pluricentric language in which there is a tight grip on the language norms in all French speaking nations. This is achieved via the organisation *Alliance Française*, and in France via the *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France (DGLFLF)* (General Delegation for the French language and the languages of France).

Until recently, the websites of French embassies in West Africa had a menu item *Defence of the French language* (‘Defence de la langue française), as I was able to observe. The French state believes that it owns the French language and there should be no interference from local or national norms anywhere in the world. This makes French a pluricentric language with a strong monocentric attitude and a strong centralisation of norms exercised by French government institutions in France.

In the German-speaking area the disintegration of the Habsburg monarchy already took place immediately after WWI resulting in an independent state called *Austria* and several national states: *Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia (SHS-state), Poland, Romania, Slovenia*. Austria became annexed by Nazi Germany in 1938. The crimes committed by Nazi-Germany in the Second World War led to the linguistic and political distancing of Germany in Austria and Luxembourg. In both countries the majority of the population did not want to be associated with Germany or be considered to be “Germans”. The result was the publication of the “*Österreichische Wörterbuch*” (Austrian National Dictionary) in 1951. It attempted to differentiate Austrian German from German German to a certain degree and it was also an attempt to demonstrate political independence after the end of the Second World War. Quite in this line was the introduction of an official spelling for *Letzeburgisch/Luxembourgish* in 1946, which had been considered a German dialect in Luxembourg and which became the official language of the Grand-

Duchy in 1984.⁷

During this period of time the disintegration of the British Empire in Asia led to the foundation of *India and Pakistan*, *Indonesia and Malaysia* and to the differentiation between *Hindi / Urdu*, *Indonesian and Malay*. In Europe *Flemish* (in Belgium) and *Dutch* (in the Netherlands), *Macedonian and Bulgarian*, *Moldavian and Romanian* are similar examples of linguistic differentiation processes resulting from the separation of nations.

2. The history of the pluricentric concept - 1952-1980: The early phase of the development of the pluricentric theory

The concept of the pluricentricity of languages has been introduced into sociolinguistics by Kloss (1952/1978, 1968) and by scholars from the former Soviet Union: Riesel (1953, 1962, 1964), Smirnickij (1955), Stepanov (1960, 1963), Svejcer (1963), Domasnev (1967), Stewart (1962, 1968). In particular Clyne (1984, 1992, 1995), Smith (1981), Kachru (1982/1992) contributed fundamental ideas to the pluricentric model.

The first scientist to contribute fundamental considerations to the theory of pluricentricity was Heinz Kloss, a German linguist who had worked in the US. He published a book in 1952 that dealt with the development of newer Germanic languages since 1800. He observed that there were Germanic languages that are limited to a single country whereas others (English, German etc.) were used in more than one country. He introduced the terms “*Ausbausprache*” (a language extending its functionality) and “*Abstandsprache*” (language with linguistic distance) which deal with the relationship between dialects and languages. Both terms were taken up by eminent scholars like Uriel Weinreich and Joshua Fishman and became important concepts in American sociolinguistics from the 1960s onwards.

Around the same time, in the Soviet Union, Austrian born Elise Riesel, published an article in 1953 which dealt with the question of the national language of Austria. She was the first to speak of “*national varieties*” of a language, which she elaborated in her 1964 publication “*Der Stil der deutschen Alltagsrede*” [The style of German everyday speech.] Smirnickij (1955), Stepanov (1960, 1963) and Svejcer (1963) (all of whom lived in the Soviet Union) followed suit in using the term in their publications on Spanish and English. It is not clear whether Riesel had studied Kloss's work, but both of them can be seen as the real originators of the idea of the existence of pluricentric languages. It is important to note this as most scholars refer to Stewart (1968)

as the first author who put forward the idea of *monocentric* and *pluricentric* languages. This is not correct as the terms had been used in Soviet linguistics and by Kloss before.

However, in Western linguistics it was Stewart (1962/1968:534) who introduced the terms “*polycentric*” and the distinction between “*endonormative*” and “*exonormative*” standardization that became a cornerstone of pluricentric theory:

The standardization of a given language may be monocentric, consisting at any given time of a single set of universally accepted norms, or it may be polycentric, where different sets of norms exist simultaneously. When a language has come to be used in more than one country and has, in addition, developed multimodal standardization, the form of standardization in any one country may be either *endonormative*, when it is based upon models of usage native to that country, or *exonormative*, when it is based upon foreign models of usage. [Italics in original]

Stewart also pointed out that the reasons for the development of “*polycentric*” standardization may be related to political or religious identity or geographical location, or may be found in the incomplete replacement of an older norm by a newer one.⁸

Kloss (1978) used Stewart’s concept in the second enlarged and revised edition of his seminal work on the development of Germanic languages. According to him, a pluricentric language is a language with more than one centre, a polycentric language with more than three. The differentiation was not adopted by other scholars. However, he outlined two other important pillars of the theory of pluricentric languages:

“Standard languages are particularly often pluricentric, e.g. have several varieties with equal rights where they are the official and administrative language of several major independent states, such as Portuguese in Portugal and Brazil, German in BRD, DDR, Switzerland, and Austria, Dutch in Kingdom of the Netherlands (Dutch) and in Belgium (Flemish).”⁹

Kloss clearly refers to states/nations as the creators of standard systems as it is their unique right to attribute a certain status to languages/ varieties of languages etc. by law. He also points out that varieties of the same language being used in independent nations are equal in their status as they are valid in the respective nation. It is *functional equivalence*, which is what Kloss had in mind. In most PCLs, however, there is no “real” equivalence between the

dominant and the non-dominant varieties, as the relation is usually asymmetric and the norms of the dominant nation are preferred.

3. The history of the pluricentric concept - The first central phase of development: 1980-1990

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the dissolution of the British Empire and the decolonisation of many nations that retained English as an administrative or national language had a major influence on the development of the theory of PCLs. However, the dissolution of the French colonial empire, did not bring about a similar linguistic emancipation, whereas the earlier dissolution of the Spanish empire in the Americas led to a large number of language academies that sought to preserve the purity of the language and fend off national adaptations. The concept of pluricentricity of languages therefore initially developed primarily among linguists working in the English-speaking world. A key to understanding the effects of national multilingualism and linguistic variation was – as already mentioned before – Stewart's (1962/1968: 534) essay in which he introduced the concepts of *exonormative/endonormative* standardization.

1978 can be taken as a crucial year, in which research on pluricentric languages received a strong push by the publication of the revised and enlarged publication of Kloss (1978) and two conferences where the term “*World Englishes*” was intensely discussed and later popularised through the publications of Smith (1981) and Kachru (1982/1992). If we take Stewart's publication of 1968 and Kachru's publication of 1965 as a substantial starting point, we even have more than 50 years of research in this field.

A significant impetus was also provided from the publication of the Macquarie dictionary in Australia in 1981; the publications of Kachru (1965, 1982) Kachru/Smith (1986) about *Asian and Indian English*, and especially about indigenised varieties in *Singapore, Malaysia, India and West Africa* (Stevens 1980; Trudgill-Hannah 1982; Kachru 1981, 1982; Platt-Weber-Ho 1984). Clynes' 1984 publication "*Language and society in the German speaking countries*" on the pluricentricity of German proved to be particularly influential as it reversed the overwhelming monocentric views that had been held until then by most linguists working on the German language.

At this time, a split in the approach to pluricentric languages happened. Major scholars working on international English like Kachru (1988), McArthur (1987) and Görlach (1990) published models of world English in the form of

circles. Today, it is mainly Kachru's model that prevails. It differentiates between "inner circle", "outer circle" and "expanding circle" of varieties of English. It is obvious that this model is only applicable to English and has no relevance for other PCLs, as their language situation is different or is simply not comparable.

A second division exists between linguistically and sociolinguistically oriented models of researching and describing PCLs. To date, research on English as a pluricentric language is predominantly focused on linguistic differences whereas the research conducted in the context of the WGNDV¹⁰ is primarily sociolinguistically oriented. That means that not only linguistic differences are taken into account, but also the social value features of the varieties of PCLs have for the personal and national identity of the population.

The pluricentricity of English was already recognised in the late 1970s and early 1980s, given its global spread and the dominance of US-English over British English. Clyne's publication of 1984, in which he considered German to be a PCL, caused much debate among German linguists who found it difficult to accept this view – even though publications about Austrian German (AG) were released already in the early 19th century and Lewi (1875) represented a strong account of the existence of AG. Ever since the exclusion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from the "Deutsche Bund" [German Federation] in 1866, German has been a PCL since then. A fact that is still ignored by some German linguists today.

4. The history of the pluricentric concept - The second central phase of development: 1990-2010

A milestone in the development of the theory of pluricentric languages was Michael Clyne's seminal publication "Pluricentric languages: Differing norms in different nations", published in 1992, which discussed 17 PCLs and laid the foundations of today's theory of PCL.

(a) Clyne (1992: 1) defined PCLs as "*languages with several interactive centres, each providing a national variety with at least some of its own (codified) norms.*"

He also introduced the terms "*dominant*" and "*non-dominant*" variety"¹¹, which are a cornerstone and one of the most central notions of the pluricentric concept. In both the prologue and epilogue of his 1992 volume, he made a large number of important observations on PCLs, which he drew from the papers of the 17 pluricentric languages in his book. They are listed and discussed here in detail as they provide a solid basis for the theory of pluricentricity.

(b) *"Pluricentric languages are both unifiers and dividers of people. They unify through the use of the language and separate them through the development of national norms and indices and linguistic variables with which the speakers identify."*

As a result, the establishment of national varieties leads to a certain alienation between speakers of the older and the newer varieties of the formerly uniform language community.

(c) *"They mark group boundaries (Barth 1969, Tajfel 1981) indicating who belongs and who does not."*

The consequence is: Speakers of national varieties living in another national variety are sometimes signalled that they are neither part of the language community nor of the new nation. However, this can change after some time and efforts to integrate into the new language community.

(d) *"National varieties may be seen as symbols of suppressed potential language conflict as the development of a distinct Ausbau language has not gone ahead [...]"*.

The reason for this is that the creation of new varieties is almost always the result of the creation of new nations through acts of independence and/or the separation of territories and large parts of the population due to war, acts of discrimination and oppression etc.

e) *"[...] the question of "pluricentricity" concerns the relationship between language and identity on the one hand, and language and power on the other."*

This fundamental feature of pluricentricity gains its relevance when it comes to codifying newly founded national varieties. A thorough codification of the language usage in the new variety will eventually lead to the establishment of a new language in the long term. This is often rejected by the traditional elites, because they fear for their prestige. They prefer to share in the power of the established (dominant) variety rather than create a new language. Especially in non-dominant varieties, there is always a conflict of the preference between the (new) identity and the participation in the power of the established language norms.

(f) *"Cultural élites in the O [non-dominant] nations tend to defer to norms from the D [dominant] nation(s). This is related to the fact that the more distinctive forms of national varieties are dialectally and sociolectally marked. [...]"*. The result is: *"Convergence is generally in the direction of D-varieties when speakers of different national varieties communicate."*

These observations are important because they touch on the central criterion of the linguistic community's *loyalty to its own language*. As the native features of the new varieties are often social and regional marked, the social

elites often refuse to adopt this (new) language, as it puts their social status into question.

(g) *"Almost invariably, pluricentricity is asymmetrical, i.e., the norms of one national variety (or some national varieties) is (are) afforded a higher status, internally and externally, than those of the others."*

This observation marks another central feature of pluricentricity. Non-dominant varieties are at a disadvantage compared to the dominant varieties because they generally lack the resources for language and status planning in many respects. Details will be dealt with later in chapter 10.

(h) *"A "pecking order" of national varieties may be determined by relative population size of the nations, their economic and political power, historical factors ("original heartland"), and dominant or co-dominant status of the language within the nation (Kloss 1976), and whether the all national variety is native or nativized." [...] "D nations have better resources than O nations to export their varieties through foreign language teaching programs."* This quote sheds light on how linguistic dominance is achieved.

(i) *"A pluricentric language with two or more varieties is a development based on the Ausbau principle, sometimes even the first stage towards the declaration and codification of separate languages, something that has taken place in the case of Hindi/Urdu and Indonesian/Malay/Malaysian and, to some extent for Croatian/Serbian [...]"*

Written in 1992, this work is based on Kloss (1978) ideas and has proved to be correct, as the war in former Yugoslavia led to the creation of a number of new states and the creation of four Serbo-Croatian-based languages: *Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian*, which by some scholars are considered as national varieties of the now defunct Serbo-Croatian language. A similar case was the division of Czech and Slovak into two different languages as a consequence of the division of Czechoslovakia into two independent states.

(j) *"The D nations tend to confuse "national variation" with "regional variation" on the strength of overlapping linguistic indices without understanding the function, status and symbolic character of the "national varieties" and their indices." [...] "There is a belief, especially in the D nations, that diversity exists only in the spoken norm."*

This observation is also of central importance for the theory of pluricentricity as examples can be found all over the world. In the German-speaking area, this misunderstanding has led to the creation of the pluriareal model that denies the existence of national varieties and runs counter to the pluricentric model. (See chapter 14 for details).

In this respect Kloss (1967) already pointed out by saying: "Under no circumstances should the term "language variant" be confused with "dialect". National language variants have their own dialects, and their relationship is not different from the relationship between a literary language [e.g. standard language] and dialects of a nationally homogeneous language."¹²

(k) *"The D nations generally regard their national variety as the standard and themselves as custodians of standard norms. They tend to consider national varieties of O [non-dominant] nations as deviant, non-standard and exotic, cute, charming, and somewhat archaic."*

The consequences are: Speakers of dominant varieties quite often show a patronising attitude towards speakers of non-dominant varieties. This attitude has repercussions for speakers of non-dominant varieties when it comes to work in the language industry of dominant varieties. There are plenty of examples of people coming from a non-dominant variety and trying to work in Germany or in France for example and being rejected as their language was not "good enough".

(l) *"In some cases, members of D nations are not even familiar with (or do not understand) O [ND] national varieties - e.g., Brazilians do not generally know Portuguese Portuguese, and French French and Portuguese and Brazilian Portuguese speakers have never been confronted with African varieties of French and Portuguese respectively." This contributes to the alienation between the varieties of the PCL.*

The era of 1990-2010 was marked by a massive rise of research and many publications about different pluricentric languages. The foundation of the "International Working Group on non-dominant varieties of pluricentric Languages" (WGNDV) in 2010 (<https://pluricentriclanguages.org>) has led to the publication of 22 volumes with a total of 234 papers on 44 pluricentric languages / national varieties.¹³ In the period before the foundation of the WGNDV (1990-2010) already another 24 volumes on Austrian German and German pluricentric language were published.¹⁴ There were also a particularly large number of publications dealing with "World Englishes": Schneider, 1997 *Englishes Around the World*; Schneider et. al. 2007: *A Handbook of Varieties of English*; *Postcolonial English* 2007 etc. to name a few. And there were more and more publications on other pluricentric languages like Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish and others.

5. The history of the pluricentric concept - The latest phase of development: 2010-2025 – The introduction of the pluriareal concept

However, already in the mid-1990s the concept of German as a pluricentric was massively called into question by two authors of Austrian origin: Norbert Richard Wolf and Hermann Scheuringer. Wolf denied that German is a pluricentric language and maintained that it is a *pluriareal language* by putting forward as his main argument that nations cannot be linguistic centres due to linguistic overlapping and internal differences as well other arguments that will be discussed in detail in chapter 14. Wolf can be seen as the “founding father” of the pluriareal concept and his 1994 paper can be considered as the founding document of this movement. His arguments were followed especially by Hermann Scheuringer (1992, 1996) and by others (Pohl, Wiesinger).

With the publications of Elspaß (2005a, 2005b) a new group established itself in the mid 2000s by taking up core notions of Wolf and Scheuringer. The main effect of the pluriareal concept is that it downgrades national varieties to regional ones. It assumes a contiguous linguistic area of nations that share a common language and are neighbouring to each other. Despite the fact that this is also the case with Spanish, where nobody denies the existence of national varieties in south and central America. Nevertheless, the pluriareal group postulates general validity of its model for all pluricentric languages.

In 2010 the new group started a large scale research program called "*Variantengrammatik*" (Grammar of variants) which was intended to research variation in German grammar and at the same time should prove the validity of the pluriareal concept. Muhr (2024) using a very large linguistic corpus of 19 billion words showed that this is not the case. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 15.

It can be said that the pluriareal concept is only pursued by a certain group of German scholars while at the same time researchers worldwide working on other languages continue to follow the pluricentric model.

Footnotes:

¹ The newly founded nations were: Paraguay (1811), Venezuela (1811); Uruguay (1811), Argentina (1816); Chile (1818); Colombia (1819); Peru (1821); Mexico (1821); Costa Rica (1821); El Salvador (1821); Guatemala (1821); Belize (1821); Honduras (1821); Nicaragua (1821); Panama (1821); Ecuador (1822); Bolivia (1825). The Dominican Republic became independent only in 1865, Cuba in 1898.

² For details see Fajardo/Puntch.

³ For the term and the concept see Fishman (2006).

⁴ For details see Duarte et. al. (2016) in volume 2.

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- ⁵ See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/about-us/americas-first-dictionary>
- ⁶ <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/dictionary/>
- ⁷ See Wagner (2016) and Horner/Wagner (2012).
- ⁸ Stewart's theoretical approach did not have a lot of impact until the late 1970s when the concept was adopted by Heinz Kloss (1978: 66) and the discussion about pluricentricity of English (World Englishes) became more important.
- ⁹ [Hochsprachen sind besonders dort häufig plurizentrisch, d.h. weisen mehrere gleichberechtigte Spielarten auf, wo sie Amts- und Verwaltungssprachen mehrerer größerer unabhängiger Staaten ist, wie z.B. Portugiesisch in Portugal und Brasilien, Deutsch in der BRD, DDR, Schweiz, Österreich, Niederländisch im Königreich der Niederlande (Holländisch) und in Belgien (Flämisch).] (All translations by the author of this paper).
- ¹⁰ WGNDV: International Working Group on Non-dominant Varieties of Pluricentric Languages
- ¹¹ Clyne originally used the terms "dominant" and "other" varieties. This was changed after discussions in the WGNDV had shown that "dominant" and non-dominant" was stylistically more appropriate.
- ¹² "Der Begriff der Sprachvariante darf unter keinen Umständen mit dem Dialekt vermischt werden. Die nationale Sprachvariante hat ihre eigenen Dialekte, und ihre Beziehung scheidet sich nicht von der Beziehung zwischen Literatursprache und Dialekt national homogenen Sprache."
- ¹³ A list of references to these publications can be found at the end of this book.
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