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COLLOQUIA  HUMANISTICA

Izabela Olszewska

Institute of German Philology, University of Gdańsk, Gdańsk  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9150-0980>  
[izabela.olszewska@ug.edu.pl](mailto:izabela.olszewska@ug.edu.pl)

Book Review: Tomasz Kamusella, *Words in Space and Time:  
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## Abstract

The paper is a presentation of Tomasz Kamusella's latest book on language policy in Central Europe. The volume in question provides the reader with substantial information on the mechanisms of the creation and use of Central European languages for political action.

**Keywords:** language policy, Central Europe, dialect continuum, writing systems.

**T**he latest book by Tomasz Kamusella – *Words in Space and Time: A Historical Atlas of Language Politics in Modern Central Europe* – published by Central European University Press in 2022 (Kamusella, 2022), is a result of the researcher's interest in analysing the politics

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of language and nationalism in contemporary Central Europe.<sup>1</sup> From the recommendation on the initial pages of the atlas, in the foreword by the editor of the Irish Historic Towns Atlas project, Professor Anngret Simms, it is clear that the volume “is a blessing for everyone who is interested in Central Europe as a cultural or political phenomenon” (p. ix).

The starting point of the author’s theoretical reflections is the statement that “in reality, [...] only language understood as the biological capacity for speech (*Sprache*) is part of nature. Its actualizations – languages (*Einzelsprachen*) – are products of human history, invented and shaped by individuals and their groups. Languages (*Einzelsprachen*) are part of culture, like states, nations, universities, towns, associations, art, beauty, religions, injustice, or atheism” (p. xv). Kamusella assumes that the current political order in Central Europe is founded on the myth that languages are “natural entities” (p. xv). This myth constitutes the basis on which nations were built, and these nations began to demand the creation of *polis*, i.e. nation states. As a result, according to the author, the “predominant rule is that each Central European nation-state aspires to possess a unique language (unshared with any other polity or nation), which defines its nation and simultaneously legitimizes statehood” (p. xv).

It should also be emphasised that the author advocates the need for interdisciplinary research in the humanities (although his reflections concern the problem of language and history, this postulate can also be applied to other disciplines in the humanities as well), arguing that “this integrated approach to the study of the human past is of crucial importance for an improved understanding of the history and present day of modern Central Europe. Uniquely from the global perspective, the political shape of this region has been increasingly composed of ethnolinguistic nation-states during the last two centuries” (p. xv).

The atlas, which is monumental yet extremely clear in its structure, is composed of numerous maps and chapters (42 in total), while the entire argument is supplemented by a glossary, a comprehensive bibliographical list prepared for each chapter, and an index. It is not, therefore, a mere collection of pages, but a work filled with many scientific facts, analyses and, sometimes, commentaries. It should be emphasised, moreover, that the maps illustrating the specifics of the linguistic policy of individual

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Tomasz Kamusella *The Politics of Language and Nationalism in Modern Central Europe* (Kamusella, 2008).

regions in a given space-time constitute a graphic medium of textual information – perfectly constructed, extremely clear – also for the average reader, not only for the scientist.

The first seven chapters of the atlas, entitled “Dialect Continuum”, characterise, as the name suggests, the phenomenon of affinity and intermixing of the various dialect groups, with no clear linguistic boundaries being identifiable within each group. From Chapter 9 to Chapter 18, practically century after century, the author takes us through the meanders of historical events, figures, and the resulting linguistic situations. It must be pointed out that research usually covers these topics separately as either historical, religious or linguistic information. The chapters are built on a similar scheme – complementing the subject matter of “Dialect Continuum” each time is a chapter entitled “Central Europe’s Writing System”.

In the chapters on the Dialect Continuum, the starting point of the theoretical discourse and terminological findings is the assumption that

during the past two centuries the concept of “a language” (*Einzelssprache*) has been a highly politicised category of thinking about politics and societies in Central Europe. Today, the region is divided among nation-states. The founding and existence of practically all these polities has been justified with the ethnolinguistic strain of nationalist ideology. Nationalism proposes that a legitimate state (that is, nation-state) should be for one nation only. (p. 5)

In this part of the atlas we learn what *Einzelssprache* is, what is/was the role of dialects, as well as what the dialect continuum mentioned in the title is for Central Europe. Additionally, the author reminds us about the role that individual religions, trade, politics and territorial expansion or armed conflicts played in the process of language development. The chapters entitled “Central Europe’s Writing Systems” describe the origin of writing and the development of writing technology over the centuries in a very thorough and comprehensible manner.

The subsequent chapters thematise various stages of language policy in Central Europe; for example, “The Latin-Language Geography of Early Modern Central Europe” (Chapter 9), “Official Languages in 1721” (Chapter 10), “Ethnic Cleansing before the Balkan Wars” (Chapter 11) or “Isomorphism of Language, Nation and State” (cf. Chapter 12). This section of the atlas mainly concerns the role of the Latin language, the invention of printing, and slow secularisation. And thus, in the chapter entitled “Europa Media anno 1721: The Latin-Language Geography of Early Modern

Central Europe” (pp. 41–42), Lav Šubarić analyses the issue of early modern Latin culture and points out that

around 1721, in some respects, Latin was still a dominant language in Europe. It was the language of education; not only the curriculum’s main subject, but the very medium of education in the majority of secondary schools, as well as at most universities. Latin afforded a common bond for the intellectual elites throughout (Christian) Europe. Hence, it was the language of choice used by the international learned community, or the so-called *Res publica litteraria* (Republic of Letters), for transmitting and discussing scholarly and scientific knowledge. (p. 41)

This state of affairs obviously influenced the nomenclature (cf. comments in the subsection “Latin and Latinized Toponyms”, p. 42) – as the author notices that “Latinizing vernacular names was especially easy if they ended in ‘-a’, as they could without any transformation be inflected according to the rules of the first declension in Latin, for example, ‘Poltava, Poltavae’ or ‘Volga, Volgae’. Other names had to be forced into the Latin declension system”.

Another stage that influenced the development of language policy was the Reformation and secularisation. As Kamusella claims,

the process of construing speech through the technologies of writing (scripts) and printing produced a lot of new Einzelsprachen (languages) from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. This process accelerated when, in the wake of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, the concept of Einzelsprache was secularized. No longer did a “proper” language have to be identical with the “holy tongue” of the original or approved translation of a “holy book”. (p. 43)

Another major point in *Words in Space and Time* is the proposal to look at language through the lens of the Jewish Diaspora. In Chapter 16, entitled “*tsentral-eyrope* in 1910: Yiddish Geography”, Agata Reibach claims that the toponyms *Ashkenaz* and *Sephard* influenced the way Jews viewed their European homelands. An important role in the perception of Jewish spaces is played by the concept of Yiddishland, understood as “the land of the Yiddish-speaking Jews. It should be understood both as a real, geographically defined place, and as a virtual homeland for numerous Jews who identify with Yiddish language and culture” (p. 73). Characterising “Yiddishland in Central Europe”, Reibach emphasises, among other things, the fact that Ashkenazi Jews were a non-homogeneous group, and “Jews who had lived in Central and Eastern Europe for over eight centuries created their own unique culture”, which, naturally, had its consequences. In other words, “the phenomenon of Yiddishland underlines the fact that typically a geographically defined place played a secondary role in understanding

the Jewish civilisation”, while centuries of contact between the Ashkenazim of Central and Eastern Europe and their non-Jewish neighbours resulted in the creation of a specific linguistic topography (e.g. Warszawa – Warsaw – will always be known in Yiddish as *Varshe*).

The experience of Jewish communication in the Diaspora is also referred to in the next chapter of the atlas, entitled “Centra Eŭropo en 1910: Geographic and Place Names in Esperanto” (pp. 75–81) and written by Walter Źelazny, presenting the ideas of Ludwik Zamenhof (1859–1917), creator of the Esperanto language. Zamenhof’s aim was not so much to create an exclusively universal language (such as Volapük, Ido or Interlingua), but to create a platform for understanding between people of different languages and cultures, without declining their national languages and cultures. As the author recalls, Zamenhof

wanted to reform all socio-ethnic relations so that: “without uprooting a man from his homeland, from his language and from his confession, [Esperanto] would let him overcome all the contradictions of his national-religious background, thus allowing him to communicate with all people of all languages and religions on the neutral basis of common humanity, according to the principle of reciprocity”. (p. 75)

In harmony with this idea, the concept of “neutral names” – since, as Zamenhof rightly claimed, no state represents all the languages, cultures and religions of its citizens – posited that states and regions should be known by neutral geographical names rather than names derived from the names of their peoples, languages or religions. As pointed out by Źelazny, “the general rule governing the creation of geographical neologisms in Esperanto is that proper names in their original languages are ‘assimilated’ into Esperanto (‘Esperanto-ized’) in such a way as to allow for unambiguous identification of them with the original geographical name. Bearing this rule in mind, the neologism is endowed with pronunciation, spelling, and morphology that is typical for Esperanto” (p. 78), cf. *Berno* (Bern), *Jamusukro* (Yamoussoukro) or *Kolombo* (Colombo).

It is worth noting that Kamusella also draws attention to tragic moments in history. In the chapter “Ethnic Cleansing in Central Europe” (referring to Chapters 11, 19 and 26–30) we find references to totalitarianisms, wars and ethnic cleansing from the 18th to the 21st century.

Subsequent pages of the atlas are devoted to issues of the isomorphism of language, the nation and the state, as well as the dialect continuum and Central Europe’s writing systems, whereas the theoretical discourse part

of the atlas concludes with topics related to borders and multi-ethnic regions in contemporary Central Europe (Chapters 37 and 38), Roma settlements in Central Europe (Chapter 40), and the Silesian language (Chapter 41).

To sum up, Kamusella's atlas can be paraphrased in the words *exegi monumentum*, as the amount of research, knowledge and information has resulted in a monumental work. The author's modern, interdisciplinary research approach, combining history, sociology, linguistics, religious studies and cartography, offers new insight into the history and politics of language. Owing to the practical analysis of historical, social and political events as well as the references to today's realities, readers will have the opportunity to enhance their knowledge and also to revise their current view of language policy. What is more, both the cartographic aspect and the text itself provide the reader with perfect multimodal reception. The maps themselves are designed to graphically convey the information contained in the text and, through their precision and clarity, will certainly speak to any audience. The atlas is a recommendable work not only for scholars, researchers of language and the history of the region, but also for those interested in new insights into politolinguistic phenomena in the world. The book undoubtedly inspires reflection on the linguistic politics of the mechanisms of the creation, exclusion and use of Central European languages for political action.

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Artykuł jest prezentacją najnowszej książki Tomasza Kamuselli na temat polityki językowej w Europie Środkowej. Na kartach atlasu odnajdujemy informacje dotyczące mechanizmów tworzenia i wykorzystywania języków Europy Środkowej do działań politycznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** polityka językowa, Europa środkowa, kontinuum dialektalne, systemy pisma.

### Note

Izabela Olszewska, Institute of German Philology, University of Gdańsk, Gdańsk  
izabela.olszewska@ug.edu.pl  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9150-0980>

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