

GLOBALIZATION, LOCALIZATION, AND LANGUAGE CHOICE

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In Britain they used to call a barometer a “glass.” One would visit the “glass” in the morning in order to get a sense of what the weather would be for the day. It was of course a rather chancy business, not least because on the average day in Britain you have a little of everything anyway. The poet Louis MacNeice caught the sentiment in a well-known poem about impending doom:

The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will fall for ever,
But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the weather.

Perhaps the least observed phenomenon in the global system is language. Because it is so basic to human communication, we are apt to regard it simply as an unchangeable part of the communication process itself – a kind of natural phenomenon as ordinary and ineluctable as weather.

In fact, language is a social institution of enormous importance, and one over which we have a great deal of control (Edwards 1994, Tonkin 2003a). Human utterances are elective: we can either make them or not make them, and we are potentially capable of making these utterances in any language. Since language is fundamental to human social interaction, we begin by choosing our utterances in accordance with the code that we are born into: language is a form of human behavior, and we learn to talk through the need and the desire to participate in the community of which we are a part. Thus the language that we use also has symbolic value: it is a marker of our identity and it reinforces our sense of belonging. But it is an accident of geography or economics that we learn one language or another, that we are born into one speech community rather than another.

Within that community, we learn participation in large part by mastering the linguistic system that that community uses. We learn not only the meanings of words and how to put sentences together, but also the rules of discourse more generally – how to tell stories, how to make jokes, how to use language to catch and hold people's attention. We learn what kind of language is appropriate in what kind of environment, developing several different registers within our own language. The capacity to master languages appears to be, at least to some degree, innate to the human species (Pinker 1995), but mastery of a particular language rather than some other language is a learned skill.

Many people are born into environments in which more than one language is in use. Sometimes, perhaps more frequently in our increasingly mobile world, even the family unit uses more than one language – and on the street the child may encounter a different

language from the language of the home. It may come as a surprise to learn that there are more bilinguals in the world than monolinguals: a majority of the world's population has at least some command of a second language, perhaps of a third or fourth. Such command is acquired less through formal education than through necessity: people learn languages because they must make a living or live in peace with their neighbors. Often their range in a given language is quite restricted: taxi-drivers who know the names of the streets of a city, but cannot sustain a coherent conversation on, say, who is going to win the World Series or what to do about Social Security; stall-keepers in markets who can converse fluently about their wares but not about the weather. Across the world, languages constitute a vast, interlocking system of immense complexity (de Swaan 2001). In many areas it is difficult to distinguish among languages, because of the phenomenon of dialect strings or dialect continua (Nettle 1999). Literacy, education and the imperatives of the modern nation-state have caused the standardization of many languages, but their previous condition is often still discernible beneath the cover of "proper," that is to say socially prestigious, language. If you track dialects from Portugal through Spain and Catalonia and from southern to northern France, or if you start in the same place and then move across southern France and down through Italy, you will find little by way of firm boundaries between dialects, but rather a long string of gradual changes, but of course mutual incomprehensibility at distant points on the string.

It would seem that most languages in the world are not standardized, indeed not even written down. It is also likely that the majority of the world's languages are spoken by less than ten thousand people each. For the reasons I have just noted, it is extremely difficult to establish how many languages exist – and we have more or less no idea about how many languages once existed. Scholars of language change tell us that languages come and go for many reasons, notably war and natural disasters, disease, climate change, trade, or other factors affecting the economies of communities. They do not, by the way, disappear because of some fatal flaw in, say, their system of participles. Languages are malleable, and their speakers can adapt them to suit their needs, if they feel the incentive to do so: they flourish or perish not for intrinsic but for environmental reasons, that is to say because of economic and other conditions. Indeed we may be making a mistake by reifying languages at all: as the French linguist Calvet (1999) points out, *people* live, not *languages*. Languages consist of *practice* and *representation*: what people actually do, and what they perceive they are doing. They exist, Calvet suggests (following Haugen), in a particular linguistic ecology, which is in a constant state of change (see also Mufwene 2001, Mühlhäusler 1996).

Isolation promotes diversity. If we plot the occurrence of identifiable languages on a map of the world, we find greater diversity around the equator, in places where biodiversity is also rich, and less diversity toward the poles, where communities survive through contact with one another. The island of New Guinea has far more languages today than Europe. Contact among communities and physical mobility among speakers reduces diversity by pushing smaller languages out and creating hierarchies of prestige in which one language is preferred over another until eventually the less prestigious language has disappeared altogether (Nettle 1999, Dixon 1997, Nichols 1992).

As a result of processes of globalization, we are today facing a situation in which many languages are endangered. Some see the passing of languages as a perfectly natural phenomenon, a linguistic Darwinism about which we can do nothing (Ladefoged 1992). Others argue that languages come and go (mostly go: the conditions of isolation that once brought new languages into being are less common today) as a result of human choices, and these choices can be more informed or less informed, and above all they can be influenced (Cooper 1989; Fishman 1991, 2001; Wright 2004). Some maintain that losing a language is like losing a species, since language is a mirror of human thought and through the study of language we can learn about human cognition; or they maintain that languages are devices for knowledge storage and therefore loss of a language equates to loss of a store of human knowledge (Maffi 2001, Crystal 2000, Nettle & Romaine 2000).

What is discernible at the micro level (the level of, say, a particular language in New Guinea, or on the Pacific island of Vanuatu, a notorious case of sheer linguistic diversity) is also discernible at the macro level. The world language system (the term is de Swaan's 2001) is undergoing notable changes today, characterized above all by a broad expansion of the English language (Crystal 1997) and a relative decline in the international standing of other major European languages, like French, German and Russian. We do not know how many people speak English, not least because everything depends on how we differentiate between speaker and non-speaker. In our zeal for statistics, we regularly cite this or that figure for the number of English speakers in the world, but the numbers (which differ wildly even among experts) tell us little. What does seem clear is (a) that more people are learning English through formal instruction than ever before, and that more people are learning English by this means than are learning other languages by this means, (b) more and more non-native speakers of English are emerging, to such a degree that, as Graddol suggests (1997), speakers of English as a second language may now exceed the number of speakers of English as a first language, and (c) English is increasingly becoming the default language for international communication and for the storage of information intended to be internationally accessible.

However, English is not the world's most spoken language as a first language (Tonkin 2003) (I hesitate to cite numbers because they depend on certain assumptions, for example that Hindi and Urdu are essentially one language, and that Chinese is a single language: it *is* when written, but not when spoken). And even if you include all who have some command of English as a second language, still the vast majority of the world's population does not speak English, even if it is clearly the prestige language.

Why is it the prestige language? In part because of its widespread use in science, technology and education, a use only stimulated by such phenomena as the Internet. In part because it is the language of economic prosperity, and particularly of economic self-help and economic consumption: its strong identification with individual betterment makes it a desirable language to learn, and the products of English-dominated industry – both the cultural products and also other material goods – make it doubly desirable. This is what Calvet means by *representation*: associated with English is a particular kind of ideology, and use of English brings prestige and standing to the user.

I need hardly point out that these considerations carry with them a number of ethical dilemmas, starting with accusations of cultural imperialism (Phillipson 1992). If English is the language of the strong, what happens to the weak? They can try to compete: the French and Germans have invested considerable resources in the promotion of their languages across the world, but neither language is doing well. In this country, enrollments in both French and German at the high-school and college levels are in decline. A news report in the British newspaper *The Guardian* (February 25) states that the study of languages in general is in sharp decline in British universities. But France and Germany, and most non-English-speaking countries, are witnessing the opposite: there is growing demand for foreign languages, especially English. To prosper in the competition, they must invest huge resources in foreign language instruction in the schools – a burden that the schools of the UK or the USA do not have to carry. Furthermore, in the international trade environment native speakers of English enjoy a unique advantage: not only are they born into the environment by virtue of the language they speak, but they can also play a commanding role in argument, debate, and self-presentation. Those who do not enjoy the advantage of native English are discriminated against at every level (Tonkin 2004).

This worldwide imbalance is of course only a reflection of an age-old inequality. Large languages have always beaten up on small ones, and prestige forms of language have always driven out non-prestige forms. Given the human propensity for competition, when a prestige form wins, the elite promptly invents new forms designed to exclude. Thus, we can read the invention of standardized spelling in seventeenth-century England as a grand step to increasing the efficiency and precision of English (the argument used at the time), or we can read it an elite reaction to the fact that altogether too many people were learning to read and there was a need to create new means of stratification.

The expansion of principles of human rights, of guarantees of democracy, and of sophisticated legal systems in the world have led to a greater sensitivity at the national and local levels to the needs of the less prestigious and the less prosperous (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Furthermore, a general weakening of the authority of the nation state over its citizens has created greater local control also in the matter of languages. More and more people are demanding the right to use their own languages in a local context, calling for schools in which the languages are used or taught, the right to petition government in local languages, the right to trial in local languages, and so on. Often these demands are symptoms of economic competition, in which a local community fights back against external dominance. In the British Isles, for example, processes of internal colonialism gradually marginalized indigenous minority languages, but today efforts are underway to shore up such languages, with some success in the case of Welsh, for instance. Many Welsh-speakers maintain that bilingualism is a perfectly acceptable, not to say superior, condition and that perhaps English speakers in general should cultivate it. They see their struggle for Welsh as an effort to prevent the migration of financial and human capital from the periphery to the center, in other words to reassert the right of a speech community to preserve its own identity in part through economic means.

Though it is the fashion of Americans to denigrate it, the progress of the French language in Canada over the past half-century is a brilliant example of the successful assertion of linguistic rights against centralized power. It has led to a massive shift in economic power in Quebec from the English-speaking minority to the French-speaking majority and the economic enfranchisement of vast numbers of francophones previously discriminated against through underfunded schools and a kind of language-based servitude to the old and dying manufacturing industries. As speakers of the world's most powerful language, we of course are inclined to believe in linguistic laissez-faire: setting up policies to preserve languages seems like an attempt to stop the weather and it leads to all kinds of easily documented absurdities. But formalized language policies are often the means whereby the weak protect themselves against the strong (to quote Lacordaire, "Between the strong and the weak it is liberty that oppresses"). They do not always succeed, of course (witness the failure of the effort, in the face of English, to make Hindi the national language of India), but they sometimes succeed (the success of Bahasa Indonesia, in the face of Javanese, as a unifying force in Indonesia comes to mind).

On a larger scale we see a similar competition at work in the European Union. English is playing a larger role in the Union, for reasons that we have already noted, but also because the other members cannot agree on a linguistic strategy based on a greater degree of equality. The EU principle that all languages should be treated alike is unworkable in practice – even more so with the recent addition of new members. It will always be easier to provide interpretation between English and French than between Maltese and Finnish. But is that fair on the Maltese and Finns, and do the stronger members have any obligation or responsibility to look for inclusive ways of conducting business? (Phillipson 2003)

Indeed, even as the world seems to be moving towards the development of a lingua franca there appears to be growing awareness of the value of local languages and of linguistic diversity – not instead of unity but in addition to it. Language is one of the means whereby we express our individuality, and, in a world of growing homogeneity the ability to express difference may be as important as the ability to express unity – a fact that surely underlies much of the tension around the globe today. In language, as in other matters, we must find ways of managing diversity by recognizing it, and not by concluding that it is inevitably something to be exterminated, something retrograde. Arguably, linguistic diversity is not a curse but a blessing, since language, the conveyor of culture, has the potential to preserve identity and enrich our lives. One of the lessons of a globalized world is that we can adopt and maintain many identities simultaneously.

A by-product of the Canadian debate over language has been the emergence of modeling techniques to assess the relative value of particular language policies (see for example the work of Vaillancourt, Grin, and others). Thus, if an international business adopts a single working language, there are demonstrable gains to be had in its internal workings (no more production of multilingual texts and the staff to handle them, for example), but also certain losses (efficiency lost as a result of employees failing to understand or being unable to assert their point of view in strategic decisions; inability to market effectively to speakers of other languages, and so on). The Nobel prize-winning economist Reinhard

Selten, in cooperation with Jonathan Pool, has developed game-theory approaches to the assessment of varied solutions to language difference. They do not all point to the adoption of a single language – and this is particularly so when questions other than purely economic ones are factored in (see Pool & Fettes 1998, Fettes 2003).

Indeed there are numbers of modern developments that point away from a simple one-size-fits-all approach to language difference. The growth of English may look like a kind of global endgame (though we should remember that every linguistic bid at universality – by the Romans two thousand years ago or by the French in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, capitalizing on the decline of Latin – has failed up to now; indeed, global knowledge of English may be a mile wide and an inch deep), but the emergence of a new consciousness of the importance of preserving linguistic diversity at least in developed countries is surely significant. Indeed, perhaps the major contributor to the localization of language use today is Microsoft, whose pursuit of multilingual markets has led it to localize its product in the various communities in which it is sold (which is more or less everywhere), so that it works equally well for English and Lithuanian, French and Wolof. As more and more technology becomes locally adapted, more and more languages can be employed for more and more purposes, and technology ceases to be as great a barrier as it once was.

There are those who suggest that the next step is automatic translation of texts and, through speech-recognition techniques, interpretation of speech. Technology has made great strides in the processing of natural language and it is certainly useful for rough-and-ready transferal of information from language to language, but the obstacles to accurate translation are still almost as great as they were when computers were invented, and the sheer cost of such approaches, to say nothing of their unequal application through economic exclusion, renders them still in the realm of utopias.

For the past century and a half people have been seeking to solve the problem through the creation of a single worldwide language to be used side-by-side with local and regional languages for wider communication (Eco 1995). As a speaker of Esperanto, I am one of those who see value in such an approach. I do not believe that Esperanto will force English aside anytime soon, but I do believe that it creates an environment of equality in which the ethics of multilingualism are better addressed than through systems of linguistic domination, and in which authentic exchange of cultural values has a better chance of success than through the application of the language of one party in the dialogue to the exclusion of the other party's language.

And the future? Two years ago, my colleague Tim Reagan and I published a collection of essays entitled *Language in the 21st Century* (Tonkin & Reagan 2003), in which we and our contributors sought to lay out some of the options. While some argued that the expansion of English was desirable, or at least unstoppable, others argued that the value attached to cultural diversity and to human equality demanded other approaches. The voices of capitalist efficiency and top-down development shout loudly for English, but there are many voices, among them representatives of what might be broadly defined as the Third World, like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1993), Toni

Morrison, and Ali Mazrui (1998), who dream of a world of language transparency, in which skilled translators might facilitate the exchange of texts across languages and one of the goals of the expanded educational system that is another accompaniment of globalization would be the inculcation of a belief in multilingualism.

If most of the world is bilingual, it is above all the English speakers who are not. As Werner Sollors points out (1998), shut into our largely monolingual culture, we tend not to hear the other voices in our midst – and we certainly do not hear those beyond our shores. To what extent, I wonder, are our foreign-policy blunders attributable to our inability to receive messages – except from the americanophiles in other countries who tell us what we want to hear?

Might what I have called elsewhere “stable multilingualism” be a goal for a world language policy (Tonkin 2003b)? The year 2005 has been declared the Year of Languages in the United States – in a bill sponsored incidentally by Chris Dodd, himself a good example of language-learning (he has a good command of Spanish acquired in part as a Peace Corps volunteer). One of the messages of this nationwide effort is that the United States is actually at a disadvantage as long as others understand us and we do not understand others: our very strength is also our weakness. Those of us involved in this effort want to promote foreign-language learning in this country and the adoption of a national foreign-language policy so that we can be prepared to deal with the larger world in an atmosphere of peace, mutual respect, and security. Languages matter, and linguistic diversity matters, and America is under-prepared. We can’t stop the weather, but we should know enough to come in out of the rain.

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