

Linguistic democracy: *language* or *languages* of contact in contemporary Europe

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This paper positions itself within the general question of Language Planning and intends to review the emerging problems related to communication in the contemporary era of globalization, with specific attention to the language scenario in Europe and to the consequent problems of language policy facing the EU.

In particular it will discuss two basic orientations in recent language movements: on the one hand, the emphasis on the apparent need for a language of contact, a working language for international communication; and on the other hand, the emphasis on the defense of national languages. The first position argues that rapid international communication requires a universal medium, or at least a global auxiliary language, which many people believe should be English. The second position argues that the diversity of languages, as part of our human heritage (biological, psychological, social, historical and cultural) is to be safeguarded, especially in view of the tendency towards language death, which has historically afflicted the so-called "smaller" languages, and in view of the existence of hundreds of official languages spoken in Europe. Moreover, the "standardisation" vs. "multilingualism" dichotomy is interpreted in some areas to be a political issue, a kind of "imperialism vs. nationalism" question, with relative problems relating to all spheres of contemporary society: economic, social, educational, etc.

The study assumes a political stance of linguistic democracy and will support the view that *plurilingualism* is the solution to the problems of communication in a globalized Europe. As a corollary discussion, since the keynote position of the EU language policy for the year 2001 was *linguistic diversity*, the paper will try to pinpoint some nodal aspects of the difficulty of applying this concept to the European context.

Preliminary remarks

As an introduction to this discussion, let us take a step back in history to two moments of imperialistic presumption that endangered the languages and literacy of peoples. The first is the motivation given by Bishop Diego de Landa in about 1570 for burning the books of the Maya people in the Yucatan of South America:

*These people also used certain characters or letters with which they wrote in their books their ancient matters and their sciences, and with them and figures and some signs on the figures they understood their matters and explained and taught about them. We found a great number of books of these their letters, and because they contained nothing but superstition and the devil's falsehoods, we burnt them all, which touched them to a wondrous degree and grieved them.*¹

The second is the declaration found in the well-noted document by Thomas B. Macaulay, *Minute on Education*, 1835 arguing for education in English rather than Sanskrit for the peoples of India.

*The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West...It may safely be said that the literature now extant in that language is of greater value than all the literature which three hundred years ago was extant in all the languages of the world together.*²

The Problem

As central to this discussion addressed to you as applied psycholinguists, I would like to focus your attention on the question of "language death", that is on the risk of extinction facing many languages worldwide. "Death occurs when one language replaces another over its entirely functional range, and parents no longer transmit the language to their children"(Nettle and Romaine, 2002, p. 7). The cause of language death is multiple and generally speaking, strictly related to the economic survival of communities. "When communities cannot thrive, their languages are in danger. When languages lose their speakers, they die "(Nettle and Romaine, 2002, p. 6). What is even more worrisome is the fact that cultures die along with their languages. In the words again of Nettle and Romaine (2002, p. 7), "Language death is symptomatic of cultural death: a way of life, disappears with the death of a language." Moreover there exists the concomitant risk that cultures and languages will disappear without leaving a trace for historical records, because no one has considered their languages worthy of maintenance.

In 1987 the Permanent International Committee of Linguists (CIPL) dedicated its international meeting to the theme "Endangered Languages" and formalized a document in its concluding ceremony with a call to linguists, to language policy makers and especially to UNESCO to halt

¹ Reported in the 1985 edition of *Relación de las cosas de Yucatan*, ca. 1750, ed. Miguel Rivera, Madrid: Historia 16, p. 148.

² The manuscript can be found on the following website: <http://english.cla.umn.edu/Faculty/Raley/research/englstud.html>.

the phenomenon of language death by supporting the respect, consecration and diffusion of all languages especially the so-called “smaller languages”. The call was partially successful resulting in the formation of the UNESCO MOST program for the protection of language rights, with particular emphasis on the rights of minority groups³. Within the framework of the Council of Europe, the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation of Europe, the rights of persons belonging to regional and minority groups and relative provisions relating to language rights have been addressed in many multilateral treaties and conventions. One of the most pertinent is the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (1992).

Of course European policy on language rights integrate national constitutions or constitutional acts as noted by Ferdinand de Varennes in 1996 in his study entitled *Language, Minorities, and Human Rights*.⁴ However the recent changes in the political and economic spheres of the globalized world have managed to accelerate the risk of language death and, in fact, many new languages have been added to the endangered species list. This situation has been continually monitored by the linguist Stephen Wurm to whose documentation we can add the recent books both by Crystal (2000), Dixon (1998), Nettle (2000) and by Nettle and Romaine (2002). In their recent volume interestingly entitled *Vanishing Voices: the extinction of the world's languages*, Nettle and Romaine repeat the call for action with regard to the threat of extinction facing many languages. As they note, every two weeks a language dies, meaning that in the next century half of the current 6000 languages will disappear.⁵ As Ostler (2001) emphasizes the death of two languages every month is a significant loss for the human race.

Endangered languages in Europe

Although most of the endangered languages are third world languages, the risk of extinction faces many languages also in Europe. Since this fact is often underrated, it is time to focus attention on the extent of the phenomenon in Europe. For a statistical update on the situation of language death in Europe, see the work of Tapani Salminen in the web sites dedicated to the problem.⁶ As an example we can cite the fact that the last speaker of Cornish, Dolly Penreath, died in 1977 and the last speaker of Manx (Isle of Wight), Ned Maddrell, died in 1974 (see Nettle and Romaine, 2002).

³ Available at <http://www.unesco.org/most/ln2int.htm>

⁴ It is interesting to note that from that study emerges the fact that several European countries, members or candidates for membership in the EU, are listed as not having at all constitutional provisions protecting linguistic rights (and they are the Czech Republic, Denmark, Iceland, Latvia, the Netherlands, San Marino, the United Kingdom). Interestingly, neither do the USA or Australia.

⁵ Some examples of the languages which have recently disappeared due to the death of their last speaker are Cornish, Manx (Isle of Man), Mmbabaram (North Queensland, Australia), Ubykh (Northwestern Caucasus), Catawha Sioux (USA), and Cupeno (Pala, California). At great risk are the Aboriginal languages of Australia but also the Celtic languages (Irish, Scottish, Gaelic, Welsh and Breton).

⁶ See the link in <http://www.helsinki.fi/tsalmin/endangered.html>

The formation of a new economic, political and governmental entity like that of Europe, implying the search on the part of many nations for common ground, is not free of complexity and contradictions. The European Union is openly committed to “linguistic diversity” as a key element in Europe’s cultural heritage. Consequently, it would be implicitly against the dominance of English or against any practice that created cultural barriers and endangered the lesser-used languages. In many of its declarations and provisions, it has fostered the respect of language rights and of linguistic pluralism. As examples we can cite European declarations and conventions relevant to linguistic rights like the *Charter of Paris for a New Europe*⁷ or programs of action like the project, *2001 European Year of languages*,⁸ which has sponsored conferences all over Europe.

According to many scholars, however, the need itself for cross-national negotiation and communication leads inevitably to the recognition of English as the European contact language, a fact feared by some to threaten multilingualism, to undermine diversity and to sanction the hegemony of British and American culture. Evidence of this fear is manifest in many contexts. To cite one of them, we can refer to the petition, available on the web in the many official languages of the European Union, of ECRCLE (the European Committee for the Respect of Cultures and Languages in Europe), whose aim is a “humanist and multilingual Europe, rich of its cultural diversity” and which accuses the EU in a way of giving only lip service to the claim of “respect of languages”. Its document recites as follows:

*Linguistic pluralism and diversity are not obstacles to the free circulation of men, ideas, goods and services, as would like to suggest some objective allies, consciously or not, of the dominant language and culture. Indeed standardization and hegemony are the obstacles to the free blossoming of individuals, societies and the information economy, the main source of tomorrow’s jobs. On the contrary respect for languages is the last hope for Europe to get closer to the citizens, an objective always claimed and almost never put into practice. The Union must therefore give up privileging the language of one group.*⁹

Thus, according to some critics, current EU policy claims to be neutral and to encourage multilingualism, and does so partially as in the projects and treaties dedicated to questions of diversity and multilingualism. Nonetheless, there remains a great risk that English continues to

⁷ The Charter of Paris for a New Europe, adopted by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe at a Summit Meeting of heads of State or Government of participating States in Paris on 21 November 1990. The text reads as follows:

We affirm that the ethnic cultural linguistic and religious identity of national minorities will be protected and that persons belonging to national minorities have the right freely to express, preserve and develop identity without any discrimination and in full equality before the law.

Information on political provisions concerning linguistic rights can be found in <http://www.unesco.org>

⁸ Information on European Union and initiatives concerning languages in Europe can be found in the following web site, http://europa.eu.int/comm/educatin/languages/lang/european_languages.html

⁹ <http://web.inter.nl.net/users/Paul.Treanor/eulang.html>

grow as a contact-language in EU communications policy. At most, plurilingualism in the European context often turns out to be interpreted as the national language, a second language (English), and then hopefully, one or two more other languages. I would call this (in analogy to the controversy raging in America, the so-called English-Only Ideology) — the English-First ideology.

The EU then faces a serious problem. On the one hand it embraces the cause of **diversity**— of pluralism and democracy, calling for a multilingual Europe and a forceful defense of minority rights. On the other hand it supports theories and practices of **cohesion**, advancing the claim for a common European culture. If cohesion implies the need for a single linguistic medium for all Europeans, then a kind of lingua franca, a working language or a language of contact, which would facilitate communication, negotiation, organization would be in order. This often leads to the unquestioned assumption that the language of contact can only be English. Since English is the most widely spoken language, the language of research and science, of commerce and technology, of worldwide communications, in short, de facto the “global language”, its adoption for inter-European communications would perhaps accelerate the difficult road to cohesion of the new Europe.

The problem with Global English

It is generally acknowledged that the use of the English language worldwide is conveying a universal status to it, a fact which has determined the expression “Global English”. Just what is Global English, however? From the research by Rita Raley,¹⁰ we can identify four basic interpretations of the term:

1) As evident in the existence of projects and publications like the British Council’s English 2000 Project”, the electronic publication “The Global English Newsletter” and numerous, recent studies on the role of English (see for example Crystal 2000 or Wallraff 2000), the term is intended literally as the adoption of English as the global language.

2) A second interpretation is represented by the position put forward by David Crystal (1997). According to this perspective, the need for a common language is not in contradiction with the need for maintenance of local languages. In this view, English can have a double function. On the one hand, it can serve as an international medium of communication, a worldwide standardized code, but on the other, it can also take the form of “New Englishes,” as different varieties of English derived from its use by local cultures. Obviously this “global plus local” interpretation of the role of English posits nonetheless the English language as the universal medium of communication.

3) A third interpretation is related to power formations in the world today and sees “Global English” as the linguistic face of imperialism (see Phillipson 1992), often as a form of economic and even political hegemony through the imposition of a dominant language.

¹⁰ Raley, Rita. What is Global English?, <http://english.cla.umn.edu/Faculty/Raley/research/englstud.html>

4) A fourth interpretation sees Global English as a kind of user-friendly “*technese*” universally comprehensible to everyone, not necessarily related to questions of culture, history and literacy and needed for the rapid diffusion and easy access to the world wide web of Internet communications. Raley gives as an example the advertisement of a Lotus software package claimed to be “widely available in Global English from U.S.”. In fact, recent trends in globalized communications and economics have resulted in an increase in the presence and importance of the English language. The web entered the world first in English and only after became multilingual, and notwithstanding, still today, according to statistics reported recently in a CNN web page, almost two thirds of the world’s Web traffic comes from the U.S. Japan is second, with 7 percent, followed by Germany with 5 percent. Spanish language Web sites, one of the fastest growing Internet segments, make up less than 2 percent. As the CNN journalist (Flynn 2000) remarked:

Even though the number of Web users from outside the US is expected to grow faster than that of Americans, most of what you find on the Web is American. Some countries find that threatening.

In a similar vein, a columnist of *The Economist* writes:

IT IS everywhere. Some 380m people speak it as their first language and perhaps two-thirds as many again as their second. A billion are learning it, about a third of the world’s population are in some sense exposed to it and by 2050, it is predicted, half the world will be more or less proficient in it. It is the language of globalization—of international business, politics and diplomacy. It is the language of computers and the Internet. You’ll see it on posters in Cote d’Ivoire, you’ll hear it in pop songs in Tokyo, you’ll read it in official documents in Phnom Penh. Deutsche Welle broadcasts in it. Bjork, an Icelander, sings in it. French business schools teach in it. It is the medium of expression in cabinet meetings in Bolivia. Truly, the tongue spoken back in the 1300s only by the “low people” of England, as Robert of Gloucester put it at the time, has come a long way. It is now the global language.

Furthermore, most economic organizations: banks, companies, stock markets, transnational corporations conduct their business in English. Both governmental and non-governmental international organizations do likewise. English is the working language of The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the North American Free Trade Area, to name only a few. Job markets therefore increasingly require English language skills, thereby determining the formation of an Anglophone labor market. Universities consequently find themselves in Western and especially now in Eastern Europe with a high demand for English language instruction for all areas of higher education.

One senses in all discussions on this topic a fear of a new kind of cultural imperialism enacted by an ominous NET having its own culture and language, a cyber culture and a cyber language. Moreover, given its invasion into the home and workplace, and the consequent tendency to foster homogenization and globalization, the NET potentially and over-powerfully influences cultural practices and communication strategies.

Thus, due to the obvious interrelationship between language and culture, this omnipresence of the English language is not without its risks. As expressed by Barton (1944, p. 6, and cited in Watson 1999, p. 5):

As English spreads across the world, British and American concepts of literacy get exported in the same way as other goods and services are being exported, harmonized, standardized; and in particular, it is Western school practices which are becoming more dominant within societies and across societies, Inevitably, this process is eclipsing minority languages, creoles and dialects as the economic dominance and the influence of US culture spreads.

Many critics feel therefore that since the U.S. exerts a hegemony over mass media, a situation accelerated and consolidated by the recent emergence of the world wide web, it inevitably heavily influences the shaping of cultural practices and social traditions, thereby threatening the survival of regional identities and linguistic differences.

Obviously this impasse must somehow be overcome if we are to establish principles both of cohesion and diversity in this new Europe of ours. As commented by Buttigieg (1999, p. 56):

I do not know the way out of this impasse. I do know, however, that there are two approaches or lines of thinking that are debilitating, if not paralyzing, and that they must be dispelled to make possible an intelligent analysis of the phenomenon of global English. They are (1) the notion that the teaching/acquisition of English is a culturally and politically neutral endeavor; and (2) that the spread of global English and its effects can be understood and analyzed as just another instance of colonial or imperial power emanating from a center and subjugating the periphery, and that therefore one must attempt to recuperate one's own "original" (that is, untainted by foreign influences).

Cohesion versus diversity in the new Europe

If the two main objectives of the European Union are cohesion on the one hand and diversity on the other, then this double task is seen by some critics to be a source of potential conflict, as "tensions that emanate from European Union (EU) commitments to cohesion and social solidarity,

and the heterogeneity that characterizes the Union's human geographies." (Graham and Hart, 1999, p. 259). The Treaty of Amsterdam envisages convergence objectives for the European Union, which should be "focused on the attainment of a cohesive and inclusive society based on solidarity, as well as diversity". They clarify that:

... the sentiments expressed in the Treaty clearly invoke the nature of belonging, the strategic and positional concept of cultural identity, and the ways in which people engage culturally with their systems of governance and empowerment through territorial structures which, inevitably, are constructed realities.

On the other hand, Graham and Hart note that the European Commission, in the form of DG XVI – "arguably conceptualizes diversity as regional, and primarily economic, heterogeneity although, again, its conceptualization of the meaning of 'region' is less than transparent, the cause, according to them, of "what many have interpreted as "irreconcilable forces" (1999, p. 359).

So the problem emerges as how to reconcile cohesion and diversity. In order to move in this direction, perhaps some theoretical constraints must be counteracted. First of all, we could adopt as a starting point the kind of perspective found in the First Report on Economic and Social Cohesion, which states that: "Cohesion and diversity are not conflicting objectives, but can be mutually reinforcing" (Commission of the European Communities (CEC), 1996, p. 15, cited in Graham and Hart 1999, p. 259). To operationalize that perspective however, three constraining positions should be overcome, — those that I refer to as: 1.the deficit position, 2.the One-code position, 3.the English-first position.

Overcome the deficit position

This refers to the kind of "deficit" ideology associated with positions emphasizing the "minority" quality of many communities and their languages, implying that they are "missing" something that majority cultures and languages have, and that this situation must be remedied by legislation that "protects" them. Just exactly what is minor about Irish or Franco-Provençal or Ladino? On the other hand, what is needed is a sense of the equality of all languages and cultures and a conviction that it is "otherness" itself which is an asset for humanity, and should be erected to the status of primary and sine-qua-non condition for human, social and political interaction. It is true that language offers a sense of "heritage", of one's own history and identity. However, it is equally true and extremely important to remember that languages offer a channel for the understanding and the development of **other languages** — and therefore represent the source of language contact, of language change, of language growth.

Overcome the One-code position

The One-code position would group all those thinkers who insist on the need for a single, universally viable code of communication¹¹. Perhaps this position can be overcome by foreseeing a change of perspective from a previously argued polarized theoretical framework,— *for or against* homogenization, *for or against* a single communication code — to a more careful interpretation and possible redefinition of the concept “language of contact”. In other words from a “plurilingualistic” point of view, there is no reason why we cannot envisage the term “language of contact” in the plural — as *languages of contact*. Practically speaking, in order to avoid giving simply lip service to the concept of linguistic diversity and plurality, certain concrete steps must be taken to activate, from a political and institutional stance but also, more generally, from a social and communicative point of view, the adoption of many languages in Europe as medium of political, social and commercial negotiation.

Overcome the English-First position

It is obvious that plurilingualism cannot mean English for all and then any other language you add on to it. This is not plurilingualism but the establishment of the dominance of English. This implies that the citizens of Europe should be willing and open to the learning and speaking of many languages, an objective launched and financed by the European Commission but often misunderstood and badly applied in local contexts.¹²

A shift of Perspective

Thus a first step in the right direction is to return to the concept of multiculturalism and to understand the nature of diversity. An identifiable Europe can only be built on a representation of diversity conceptualized along a multitude of axes of differentiation: geographic, ethnic, religious, including the intersection of multiple variables like age, gender and dialect, accepted in its dynamic and variable quality, i.e. as subject to constant change. Perhaps we can see in the following comment by Nettle and Romaine (2000, p. 173) a pertinent conclusion to what has been argued in this paper:

“Preserving linguistic diversity does not mean that language repertoires and cultures must remain unchanged. It is obvious that more and more people will require a knowledge of English and the

¹¹ I presume that most proponents of a one-code theory are motivated by convictions related to better communication and inter-group understanding. I shall not even comment on positions, which have obviously an economic motivation such as that of transnational media magnate Rupert Murdoch, who claimed in an interview on Australian radio that multilingualism is divisive and monolingualism (read: English) is cohesive (cited in Nettle and Romaine 2002, p. 19).

¹² I have noted announcements of conferences dedicated to “plurilingualism” and financed by various EU projects, in which the language of the proceedings was English. Even more disappointing is the fact that the papers were prevalently dedicated the teaching, learning and diffusion of the English language.

other world languages as they seek to tap into the exciting and profitable serves that the global economy offers. This need not necessarily conflict with the maintenance of diversity. Languages have coexisted in complimentary fashion since time immemorial. Furthermore bi- or multilingualism supplies the advantage of a strong local identity and a global communication network at almost no cost since children's capacity for spontaneous language learning is endless (Nettle and Romaine, 2000, p. 173).

As a conclusion however I would like to add the following. While it goes without saying that the support of linguistic diversity can prevent cultural and political hegemony in any form, it is also undeniable that the linguistic life of many social groups will depend on democracy in its broadest sense, that is, in its essentially political representation and economical manifestation. Adopting another disciplinary perspective, and assuming a basically ecological stance, we can remember that languages and economies co-evolve under the constraints of human geography and that there is a complex yet intricate link between economic performance and linguistic use. It has been noted that it is the economic incentives and possibilities made available to people that determine the choice of language. People respond to economic incentives not only in a strictly monetary sense but also with attitudes and reactions, which determine social, cultural and linguistic choices. So there is little evidence that language choice and use in any country can be effectively manipulated or that language planning can be in any way successful.¹³ Ultimately, the solution is political. It will be equal opportunity in all spheres, along with respect of difference and the tenacious defense of civil and human rights, which will determine the survival of peoples, their cultures and their languages.

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¹³ An interesting illustration of this fact is the comment of an Irish girl, reported in Coady (2001, p. 50) who discusses the effort in the Irish Republic to introduce education in the medium of the Irish rather than English: "When you got to France, people speak French; in Spain people speak Spanish; in Italy people speak Italian, and in Germany, they speak German. But here in Ireland, people speak mostly English, and Irish is useless."

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