

Linguistic Harmony between Indigenous Languages and English?

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1

The English language has long been referred to as a world language, an international language, a common language, or even a *linga franca*. Now the official language of the Internet, the language is overwhelmingly dominant in the computer age. The world-wide spread of English is likely to stamp out minority languages in a variety of countries and regions; the linguistic hegemony is making a profound impact of a homogenizing monoculture upon the smaller languages and ways of life.

Meanwhile, few are optimistic about the revival of indigenous languages (see Edwards 1985, Kraus 1992, and Mühlhäusler 1996). Nevertheless, there have been vigorous movements to preserve indigenous cultures and languages in various parts of the world (see, for example, DES and Welsh Office 1990 for Welsh, MOE 1992 for Maori, and DOE 1994 for Hawaiian). The aim of this paper is, therefore, to give a theoretical framework for coexistence of indigenous languages with English.

2

The global spread of English has usually been considered a positive development. Bailey (1991:116-21), for instance, gives an anthology of 22 extracts published from 1846 to 1990, every one of which essentially declares that “culture, religion, literature, technology, and wealth are all tied to the use of English.” The following are a few of the more recent extracts:

1985. English has also become a *lingua franca* to the point that any literate, educated person on the face of the globe is in a very real sense deprived if he does not know English. Poverty, famine, and disease are instantly recognized as the cruellest and least excusable forms of deprivation. Linguistic deprivation is a less easily noticed condition, but one nevertheless of great significance. (Burchfield 1985 : 160-61)
1986. The worldwide spread of English is remarkable. There has been nothing like it in history. Spanish and French, Arabic and Turkish, Latin and Greek have served their turn as international languages, in the wake of the mission station, the trading post or the garrison. But none has come near to rivalling English. ("The New English Empire" (*sic*) 1986 : 127)
1990. Fundamentally, the invention of the communications satellite as the prime mechanism for international communications has allowed penetration of vast new areas of the world. This is particularly true of opportunities to transmit television over long distances and to receptors deep inside of nations not reachable by normal ground transmissions. Not only has the space program brought about the means to disseminate great volumes of English information, but the U.S. leadership in space technology meant that the *lingua franca* of the space business also became English. This caused another mighty penetration of the world's advanced technology. (Freitag 1990 : 7)

Advocating the desirability of a global standard for the English language, Quirk and Widdowson (1985) argue :

The English language works pretty well in its global context today : certainly the globe has at present no plausible substitute. But let me underline my main point by giving four examples of English working best in the global context. They are the BBC World Service of London ; All India Radio of Delhi ; the *Straits Times* of Singapore ; and the

Japan Times of Tokyo. They represent oral and printed media, and they represent ENL, ESL, and EFL countries. And there are several outstanding features in common to these and to the scores of analogous examples that might have been selected. They all use a form of English that is both understood and respected in every corner of the globe where any knowledge of any variety of English exists. They adhere to forms of English familiarly produced by only a minority of English speakers in any of the four countries concerned. And – mere accent alone apart – they observe as uniform a standard as that manifest in any language on earth.

McGhee (1974 : 6) goes so far as to say :

English is winning (to borrow a French expression) by a *tour de force*. It is by far the most useful from the standpoint of business, science, and literature generally. More is written in English in every field. More television programs use it. There are English-language newspapers in most important non-English-speaking cities. If one language is to win, it's almost certain to be English.

(quoted in Bailey 1991 : 120)

3

In recent years, however, quite a few scholars⁽¹⁾ have set out to display their opposition to the preponderance of English. They denounce the idea that English can help the development of poor countries without endangering their cultures. Pennycook (1994), for example, discusses the “cultural politics of English as an international language,” insisting that every positive observation can be attributed to the predominant paradigm that the universal spread of English is natural because the language is politically neutral, and socio-economically beneficial. S. Kato (1997) regards the political, economic, and cultural predominance of English as “cultural imperialism,”

saying that the trend of English monolingualism deprives non-native English speakers of spiritual independence.

Describing the spread of the English language into other languages and cultures as “English linguistic imperialism,” Phillipson (1992:55) illustrates the term by saying that “it is linguistic imperialism if the English language is imposed (by sticks, carrots, or ideas)⁽²⁾ on the Welsh or the Ugandans, and linguicism is in operation.” He defines “linguicism” (*ibid.*:47) as “ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language.” Stressing a major role played by ELT (English Language Teaching) in consolidating linguicism or English linguistic imperialism, one sub-type of linguicism, Phillipson notes (*ibid.*: 123):

English linguistic imperialism is thus asserted in the domains of teaching, teacher training, and research. A foundation is laid for the maintenance of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages in the post-colonial age.

4

It is clear that this opposition to the worldwide dominance of English has dovetailed neatly into multiculturalism and multilingualism, triggering off a paradigm shift involving indigenous languages. The first to be noted is that the recent development of multiculturalism has helped indigenous peoples regain basic human rights including their language rights or “Linguistic Human Rights” (LHRs) (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1995:1). It is true that multiculturalism has been mainly concerned with basic human rights of immigrants in a number of nations, but the development of multiculturalism has also boosted the position of indigenous peoples.

In the United States, the Native American Languages Act of 1992 was enacted thanks in part to the increased acceptance of multiculturalism in the

1980s. In Canada, too, the Constitution Act of 1982 and the Multiculturalism Act of 1988, both of which proclaimed the rights of the indigenous peoples, came into being under the influence of multiculturalism. The latter guarantees the rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada as follows :

Article 35 (1) The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed.

(2) In this Act, "aboriginal peoples of Canada" includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.

Furthermore, we should not forget that the European Union (EU) has played an important role in propagating multilingualism. The Union demands that cultural and linguistic diversity be preserved in the Community. Insisting on the urgent need for research into minority languages in Europe, it set up the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (EBLUL) in 1982. Several years later, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Resolution 192, 1988, of the Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe) was adopted by 21 member countries of the Council of Europe.

Reflecting European concern over the dominance of English, the FIPLV (Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes) endorsed the call for a Universal Declaration of Language Rights. The organization expressly states in a submission to UNESCO on foreign language education up to and beyond the year 2000 :

Single language dominance must be avoided, for it is not defensible on educational grounds. Moreover, it tends to favour the 'privileged' languages of the world and neglect utterly the legitimate interests of others. (FIPLV 1988 : 1, quoted in Phillipson 1992 : 97)

The French government, afraid of the English language dominating the

world as well as the EU, took the initiative in proposing multilingualism in Europe. The French, it is clear, feel threatened by the spread of English as the only means of international communication. As a matter of fact, they fear that the recent emergence of the Internet might cause French language and culture to stagnate.

5

Multicultural/multilingual developments have contributed much to the establishment of minority groups' human rights. However, some indigenous people denounce these kinds of developments by claiming that their unique rights will be obscured or relativized amid those for burgeoning numbers of immigrants in their ancestral lands (Sugimoto 1997). Sekine (1996) discusses such dissenting ideas expressed by aboriginal peoples in Canada and Australia, who are concerned that the Central governments are oblivious to their grievances and aspirations. The status they desire could be termed "citizen-plus" status (Fleras and Elliott 1992:21). In addition to the same rights that most Canadian citizens take for granted, the aboriginal peoples are anxious to acquire the right to self-determination through self-government.

Some Australian Aborigines have gone beyond "citizen-plus" status, demanding instead an independent nation which could issue passports (Sekine 1997). They are sure to meet opposition from immigrants and the Central government.

As Kanahale (1982) insists, extreme ethnocentrism was unsuccessful in establishing the language rights of Native Hawaiians. Just as linguistic imperialism imposes the colonizers' language on the colonized people, so ethnocentrism adheres to the idea of "a single language, nation, state" and denies additional languages. The two are different sides of the same coin; they both aim at monolingualism. It is, therefore, recommended that indigenous peoples should avoid confrontation with immigrants or other minority groups. Instead, they should make the most of multicultural/

multilingual trends in establishing their indigenous rights.

Historically, the Declaration of Human Rights (1789) has attained its proposed goals only gradually; multicultural or multilingual laws will similarly lead to the recognition of various rights for indigenous peoples. The case of Canada gives us an ironical example of this development. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the then prime minister, was reluctant to recognize the indigenous rights in the new Constitution Act, but a number of political circumstances forced him to make the concession (Kato, H. 1997). Unable to limit multiculturalism only to those of German or Ukrainian descent, he was required to consider the indigenous peoples as well as immigrants from Asia and Africa. Thus, the Constitution Act of 1982 was passed and Canada took an important step toward becoming a multicultural state. Needless to say, subsequent developments concerning indigenous rights have made it impossible for us to discuss multicultural policies without taking indigenous peoples into consideration.

6

Multicultural policies should not be connected exclusively with ethnic issues; a link should also be established with further improvements in the everyday life of immigrants and other minority groups. Indigenous peoples are not exempt from such problems as aging, gender discriminations, religious persecution, and other societal problems. Thus, Sugimoto (1997) proposes “post-ethnic multiculturalism” or multiculturalism beyond ethnicity, in which factors other than ethnicity can be considered when making policy.

What is, then, the best way for indigenous languages to coexist with English? Is there, indeed, any possibility of such a coexistence at all when English is threatening indigenous cultures and languages worldwide? Arguing that “native speakers of English seem to have lost the exclusive prerogative to control its standardization,” Kachru (1985) points out that an ever-growing number of varieties of English are making the language lose its dominating effect. The outer circle (or extended circle) and the expanding

circle are strengthening the claims of English as an international or universal language. As a result, standardized English, devoid of substance, will become less threatening to indigenous languages.

To give an example, Cheung (1997) lists a 40-page selected bibliography of novels, short stories, essays, plays, poems, and literary criticism written by Asian Pacific American writers. Two decades ago we could not have imagined that such a great number of Asian Pacific American writers would emerge in the literary world. What should be stressed here is that “cultural nationalism” (to borrow Cheung’s term) has taken plural forms. In other words, the writers she lists call for a historical and literary paradigm in their writings specific to their particular Asian cultures.

Now we can understand why British parliamentarians were eager enough to set up standard English. In the Parliamentary debates on “Deterioration of the English Language in Usage,” they expressed grave apprehension about unorthodox varieties polluting and corrupting proper English (House of Lords 1979-80).

Sakai (1996) argues that we should accept the paradox of being doomed to the enhancement of English predominance by being antagonistic toward the language. Left unchallenged, he asserts, the language will be devoid of substance and lack the present dominant power. While criticizing the “English linguistic imperialism theory,” he argues that we should get rid of our presupposition that each nation-state is comprised of a single and pure culture and language. In his view, every nation-state is programmed to drive away linguistic mixtures and polyglots, thereby suppressing a multilingual character of society.

This argument forces us to the conclusion that an ideal relationship between minority languages and dominant ones is expected to be coexistence, not confrontation. But such a relationship would not be possible if the dominant paradigm of the nation-state could not be discarded or at least weakened. Otherwise, English and a number of other dominant languages would continue to suppress indigenous languages in every part of the world; nation-states are not likely to be tolerant of linguistic diversity.

Mushanokoji (1996) proposes a “New Constitutional World Order” or a new international arena which surpasses the concept of the nation-states. He highlights a few symptoms of the paradigm shift: the recent proposals for indigenous rights made by the United Nations, and the integration of Europe through the European Union. Nation-states are not likely to disappear in the near future, nor will they be replaced by a borderless world. The experiments of the UN and the EU, however, hint that nation-states will be gradually dismantled as the regions and subregions with them come to the fore.

7

Before concluding this paper, we need to reconsider our premise that indigenous or minority languages should be preserved or restored. The upsurge of revitalization movements was triggered by the ethnic revival movement in the 1960s and '70s. Ever since the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, however, we have seen ethnic conflict in a number of states and regions. Ethnic minorities have been appealing for sovereignty or independence from dominant groups. In some cases, difference of language coincides with the conflicts. It follows that we need a steadfast theoretical framework to refute the criticism that linguistic minorities are likely to arouse new inter-ethnic conflict in apparently stable nation-states.

Phillipson *et al.* (1995:4) argue that “antagonism towards linguistic minorities is based on false premises, and in particular on two myths, that monolingualism is desirable for economic growth, and that minority rights are a threat to the nation state.” As for the former proposition, Baker (1996: 57) condemns monolingualism and identifies bilingualism as an economic advantage, saying “In an increasingly bilingual and multilingual world, with trade barriers being broken, with single markets in areas such as Europe growing, and with economic competition rapidly developing on a global scale, competence in languages is increasingly important.”

The latter premise has come into the limelight since the late 1980s. In

fact, the following submissions of the Waitangi Tribunal objected to the recognition of the Maori language as an official language of New Zealand (Waitangi Tribunal 1986):

- If Maori is given official recognition it will cause divisions in the community.
- The Maori is only a minority in New Zealand and should not be allowed to force the majority to adopt his standards and values.
- If Maori is to be given official recognition, we will have to recognise other ethnic minority languages as well – Samoan, Tongan, Chinese, for example.

It is necessary, therefore, to present a valid perspective to counteract this premise; otherwise, we cannot propagate the revitalization of indigenous or minority languages.

First, this perspective should aim at defending regional languages as a way of defending regional identities against the hegemony of English or the onslaught of global culture. We can find a representative theory in Fishman (1991 : xi), who, assuming “cultural pluralism and cultural self-determination” as the political basis of reversing language shift, argues :

The destruction of minority languages is the destruction of intimacy, family and community, often involving oppression of the weak by the strong, subjugating the unique and tradition by the uniform and central.

Another representative theory comes from Graddol (1997), who proposes that English-speaking nations pay more attention than before to ethical aspects of the spread of their mother tongue through education.

Second, the viewpoint is expected to prove that bilingualism and multilingualism are indispensable for language minorities for cognitive, social, and psychological reasons. Garcia (1997) applauds immersion education as one which leads to “relative bilingualism and biliteracy.” Swain and Johnson

(1997) also state that the immersion programs in Canada were “stimulated by actions taken by Canada’s federal government, which, for example, appointed a Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, passed the Official Languages Act, and appointed a Commissioner of Official Languages....” As we discussed earlier, biculturalism and multiculturalism played significant roles in establishing human rights of indigenous peoples as well as immigrants or other minority groups.

Third, the perspective should include a legal basis in negating the false assumption about minority rights. Studies of the historical backgrounds of the decline of indigenous languages demonstrate that indigenous peoples have been deprived of their mother tongues. Consequently, most of them do not enjoy LHRs; only speakers of dominant languages enjoy all of the rights. Noting that “Often individuals and groups are treated unjustly and suppressed by means of language,” Phillipson *et al.* (1995: 2) argue:

People who are deprived of LHRs may thereby be prevented from enjoying other human rights, including fair political representation, a fair trial, access to education, access to information and freedom of speech, and maintenance of their cultural heritage. There is therefore a need to formulate, codify and implement minimal standards for the enjoyment of LHRs. These should be an integral part of international and national law.

This point of view allows indigenous peoples to demand linguistic human rights which will enable them to use their indigenous languages in many of the official contexts. They need not stick to linguistic ethnocentrism. Nor do they have to denounce English as an imperialist language. Instead of criticizing the predominance of English, they have only to disempower the language by relativizing the concept of “native speakers of English.” In other words, a variety of non-native “Englishes” should be given citizenship and that native speakers should be urged to change their attitudes toward these varieties. This will be the very embryo of a multilingual society where

indigenous and minority languages can be valued on equal terms with English, the dominant language.

Notes

1 See, for example, Tsuda (1986), Nakamura (1989), Phillipson (1992), Pennycook (1994), Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1995), and S. Kato (1995).

2 Boyle (1997) specifies each term: "the early-colonial stage which is blatantly compulsive – the 'Stick' stage; the neo-colonial stage, which is less obviously oppressive and which is marked by offers of advantage to a select elite – the 'Carrot' stage; the neo-neo-colonial stage, in which control is achieved more subtly, by ideological persuasion through the media and technology – the 'Idea' stage."

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