

Is Linguistic Democracy Possible? English and Chinese at the Heart of the Subject

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ABSTRACT: Does linguistic democracy exist or is it only a lull? Linguists and politicians believe that it has never existed, not even in countries where political democracy is a tribute to preserve. They rather believe there are only dominating and dominated languages. The dominating languages are explained by the number of people who speak a language. Presently, the US and China are respectively illustrative examples of dominance and dominating languages in the world. English ranks first in the top ten world's most important languages and Chinese is gaining supremacy over many other languages. The dominating languages are hegemonic that means their use covers indoor and offshore territories. The dominated languages therefore are considered second-class languages, they are disregarded. This linguistic attitude has always prevailed in the world. The transfer of a *dominant* language to other people is considered to be a demonstration of power, traditionally, military power but also, in the modern world, economic power, and aspects of the *dominant* culture are usually transferred implicitly. The power of a country explains the extension of its language. English, Spanish and Portuguese are the dominant languages of the Americas. In Africa, the languages of some of the colonizing powers like Great Britain, France and Portugal are more firmly entrenched than ever, as English is in several Asian countries. This study will concentrate on highlighting issues related to linguistic

dominance which could help to clarify whether the winning of independence can lead to language recovery or not.

KEYWORDS: Language, dominating, dominated, power, hegemony.

1. Introduction

A dominating linguistic attitude is prevailing in the world. It is called linguistic imperialism or language domination. It is defined as the transfer of a dominant language to other people. This transfer is viewed as a demonstration of power, traditionally military power as the case of Spanish during the reign of Charles III or French after the invasion of La Gaulle by Julius Caesars. Yet, currently in the modern world, this power is noticeably economic and aspects of the dominant culture are usually transferred implicitly.

2. A Historical Review

Research into the effects of European colonialism history on language issues took off in late seventies and beginning of eighties with the publication of different works such as Fanon (1952), Cesaire (1950), Spencer (1971; 1985), Achebe (1975), Calvet (1974; 1987), Mammeri (1982), Phillipson (1992), Pennycook (1994; 1998; 2001) and many other ethnographers, sociolinguists, politicians and writers who studied the political linguistic actions that were taken by the Europeans in favor of the supremacy of the European languages.

At first, the aim of the European colonialism was to expand and control the economic and power base of European nations and to affirm their superiority. They established a hierarchical classification of the population, putting themselves at the top of the social hierarchy and allowing themselves prestigious values.

By contrast, the colonized were identified with the subordinate position; low status and granted little or no social power. Calvet (1987, 72) identified two steps in the linguistic colonization. He called the first one, the vertical step. It refers to the social spread of the language. The idea was to first spread language among the upper classes of the colonized, those who near or represent the colonial power (in North Africa they are called Caid) and later it was spread into members of the lower classes. The horizontal step, on the other hand, targets the geographic spread. That was an effective

strategic method used by the colonizer. The colonial language is diffused step by step, from the capital and large cities to the remote places of the villages.

Much effort was conceded by the colonizers, mainly through the educational system on accepting this asymmetrical social ideology in their colonial subjects but also by creating other social and linguistic practices.

3. Describing Language Colonizing Strategies

Firstly, colonization gave rise to a new language hierarchy in which the language of the colonizer was regarded as the most prestigious language that allows it to dominate the administrative and economic structure of each colony. Since *'les dialectes africains ne sont pas des langues de civilisation'* (Fanon 1952), language policy in francophone Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal and others) prescribed the exclusive use of French. These practices have a crucial impact on the local linguistic situation. Local languages for instance ranked in the bottom of the language hierarchy. This action was meant to freeze any opportunity for functional development and for any linguistic competition between local languages for having access to new domains.

The colonial linguistic policy was meant to undergraduate the non-European languages by setting a hierarchy which was reaffirmed and enabled by dominant European views of European and non European culture and language (Pennycook 1998, 47-66). These views are plainly mentioned in the discourse around European and non-European language and culture (Calvet 1974, 165):

" Simply put, from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, European developed a conception of the world in which different people could be divided into so called 'races' and that these races differed in terms of various mental and physical characteristics"

These differences were expressed in terms by a set of dichotomies which shortly explain that the positive characteristics apply to European culture and people while the negative ones are meant for the others, i.e. the non Europeans. The colonizers were generally pictured as possessors of culture, history, human traits, intelligent and endowed with the know how while the colonized were rather considered missing these features (Pennycook 1998, 47-66).

In relation to the linguistic situation, it was considered that the concepts of language, nation, culture and power were reserved for the colonial languages. The indigenous

languages, however, linked to uncultured and lacking of military power were assigned the terms 'dialects', 'vernacular' and 'patois' implying their inferior status.

To illustrate their disregard towards the indigenous, the European invented the term 'creole' for a language which has emerged out of the contact between European and non-European languages. Non-European languages were then continuously described as ambiguous, incomplete and imprecise and therefore cannot be used for expressing modern scientific thought (Calvet 1974). The attachment of the populations to their languages was viewed as a sign of ignorance and resistance to emancipation and civilization. The fact that these populations did not develop a writing system and a literary body was considered important evidence of their inferior status. By contrast, the learning of the colonial language was seen as an asset, a precious present that would civilize them and presumably opens up their mind to the modern world.

4. The Case of Algeria

After more than one-century settlement in Africa, it was obvious that the language of the colonizer was dominating. It was commonly used in schools, in administrations and in media. More than language, the minds were culturally invaded. The population could not escape cultural invasion. It was extremely hard, if not impossible to reconstruct the society differently. When, after the independence, an attempt was made to bring some changes, the results were somehow tragic.

To sweep away the linguistic and cultural presence of the colonizers, the post-independence government in Algeria decided to "Arabize" the society, language and mind, without studying the risks. They hoped the challenge to come true. During the one-century and half French presence, no opportunity was given to the Algerian scholars to study Arabic. There was a vacuum in education and cultural fields. As there was no elite who mastered the Arabic language, the government established an educational cooperation policy with some Arab countries like Egypt and Syria to take in charge The Arabic Language education in Algeria.

The endeavor was a real failure. There was no thorough survey and the process of Arabization was fast and randomly done. They forgot that French was entrenched in the minds; besides, the so-called educationists of the Arab countries did not share the same phonological system as the Algerian population. That resulted in a serious chaotic situation. The media (television and radio) were invaded with Egyptian and Syrian films and serials that did not mirror the Algerian reality.

That situation, which was supposed to be effective, in fact delayed the progress expected and brought about internal conflicts between the Berbers (the autochthonous population of Algeria) and the non-Berbers. The paradox was that French was contributing to establish a tacit agreement between the different populations in Algeria, however after the independence, each part expected to see the emergence of their language. That was unfortunately not the case, and the imposition of Arabic as the first language in Algeria is still causing ethnic conflicts in the country.

5. Linguistic Domination through Economic Hegemony

Economic domination and penetration have taken place during ages, varying forms from mutually beneficial trade to violent robberies. The process took an especially sinister form during the times of European colonization and transatlantic slave trade. Today's globalization is due to two particular changes, one technological and the other one political.

First, the advent of electronic communications and data computers have made it possible for big companies bosses, shareholders top executives and transnational corporations to move limitless amounts of financial capital the world over instantaneously. Second, through political decisions where governments have dismantled national controls with regard to capital movements, profits and foreign investments

Robert Phillipson (2001) shows how globalization is carried out through a small number of dominating languages. Being himself an Englishman, Phillipson (2001) does not shrink away from denoting his own mother tongue as being at the heart of the contemporary globalization processes. Phillipson (2001) shows how the forces behind globalization promote the diffusion of English, often to the detriment of the mother tongues of most people. He draws attention to the role of the World Bank in rhetorically supporting local languages, but channeling its resources to the strengthening of European languages in Africa; transnational corporations seem to be well served by the bank's policies.

Phillipson (2001) points out that the colonial exercise was not merely about conquering territory and economies, but also about conquering minds. During the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial era, the British government saw the advantage of promoting English to a world language. Likewise, the globalization exercise of today is also about conquering minds. Throughout the entire post-colonial world, English has been marketed as the language of "*international communication and understanding*", economic "*development*", "*national unity*" and similar positive ascription

(Phillipson 2001). These soft-sell terms obscure the reality of North-South links and globalization, which is that the majority of the world's population is being impoverished, that natural resources are being plundered in unsustainable ways, and that speakers of most languages do not have their linguistic human rights respected.

A recent development is the globalization of distance education, which is big business for American, Australian and British universities. School-level exams in the full range of subjects are also business that consolidates the dominance of English. The University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate is the second largest examination organization in the world, after Educational Testing Services of Princeton, New Jersey. It has organized exams in 1996 in 154 countries (Phillipson 2001).

The Finnish socio-linguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2001) notes that if a state does not grant basic linguistic human rights (LHRs), including educational language rights (ELRs), to minorities and indigenous peoples, this lack of rights is what often leads to and/or can be used to mobilization of sentiments which can then be labelled "*ethnic conflicts*". Skutnabb-Kangas (2001) finds to be the case especially in situations where linguistic and ethnic borders or boundaries coincide with economic boundaries or other boundaries and where linguistically and ethnically defined groups differ in terms of relative political power.

6. Can Chinese Be a Threat to English?

Recently, Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg surprised Chinese students when he addressed them in Chinese during a conference. The talk in Mandarin, which was far from being perfect, took 30 minutes. All students appreciated his efforts. Zuckerberg's talk raises a serious question: Is Chinese the language of the future? Could it replace English as the world's international language? Mandarin Chinese includes the world's largest number of speakers, and China will soon pass the United States as the world's most prosperous economy.

The study of the Chinese language is increasing in the United States and all over the world. In 2009, about 60,000 American college students were studying Chinese; that is three times as many as in 1990. More and more people from the entire world are visiting China for business connections as well as for touristic reasons. This explains the growing number of parents in America; in Europe and elsewhere who are sending their children to bilingual Chinese immersion schools. A mother explained that classes

at her children's school are 100 percent in Chinese, she thinks knowing Chinese could certainly be beneficial and offer them a competitive advantage.

As China rises, it can be anticipated that more and more people will adopt the language. Learning Chinese will grow hand in hand with Chinese business and the amount of industry that they have or may develop, but does it represent a threat to English? Should the world holders be worrying about the status of English as being the world's first language? It is probably not an imminent possibility but in three or four generations why not.

7. Conclusion

If legitimate demands for some kind of self-determination are not met, be it demands about cultural autonomy or about more regional economic or political autonomy, this may often lead to demands for secession. Thus, granting education- and language-based rights to minorities can, and should often be, part of conflict prevention. When the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) in 1992 created the position of a High Commissioner on National Minorities, it was precisely as an instrument of conflict prevention in situations of ethnic tension (Skutnabb-Kangas 2001). The High Commissioner explained to the expert group preparing the Guidelines that the minorities he was negotiating with had, in most cases, two main types of demands: first, self-determination and autonomy, and second mother tongue medium (MTM) education.

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