

International Languages and International Human Rights

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This article assesses how some languages have become “international” and cites examples of the promotion and legitimation of the most widespread one, English. The issue of equitable language rights is considered in relation to the management of multilingualism in supra-state organizations, the League of Nations and the United Nations, and in the most ambitious and comprehensive amalgamation of states, the European Union. There is a case for considering alternatives to a system involving use of a small number of official languages when this effectively accords rights to speakers of different language backgrounds on an inequitable basis. The paper also suggests that international languages are impacting on national languages in ways that conflict with human rights principles.

International Languages

Language has always been the consort of empire, and forever shall remain its mate.
(Nebrija 1492, cited in Illich 1981, 34)

The common-sense understanding of the term “international language” is as a language that people from different backgrounds or nations use with each other. In this sense there are many international languages in use on all continents, ranging from Portuguese and Hindi to Latin and Classical Arabic, as well as more locally restricted lingua francas and pidgins.

The term “international language” has also been used to refer to artificial or planned languages such as Esperanto, languages that were created specifically in order to facilitate international links and understanding, sometimes termed international auxiliary languages. Users of these languages do not have the backing of any nation or state, in marked contrast to languages that have been transplanted worldwide such as English, French and Spanish.

Linguistic dominance has its origins in conquest, military and political subjugation, and economic exploitation. The role of language in imperial expansion has been a central element of the europeanisation of the world. The underlying language policy was articulated in a pioneer language-planning document presented to the Spanish court in 1492 (see the citation from Nebrija above). At that time the dominant languages in Europe were spoken by only a few million people and had no international currency. The contemporary status of English, French, Spanish and Portuguese indicates how successfully and ruthlessly the principle of language imposition was applied.

Colonising powers were seldom prepared to recognize that languages and cultures other than their own had intrinsic values and rights. Linguists have followed in Nebrija's footsteps in legitimating colonial linguistic hierarchies (Calvet 1974; Crowley 1991). International linguistic hegemonies draw on beliefs and attitudes to linguistic hierarchies and interlock with the allocation of more resources to the dominant language.

The imaginative project in the inter-war period to devise a restricted form of English as an “international auxiliary language”, BASIC English (BASIC = British American Scientific International Commercial), was promoted in the hope that lesser languages would be eliminated: "What the world needs is about 1000 more dead languages -- and one more alive" (Ogden, 1934, cited in Bailey, 1991, 210). Here “international understanding” was seen as unidirectional, with other languages to be abandoned in favour of the dominant language, English, this having been made more accessible through simplification.

Linguistic imperialism has invariably presupposed the superiority of the dominant language, in both the colonial and postcolonial worlds (Mühlhäusler 1996; Phillipson 1992). The British and Americans created a substantial academic infrastructure to serve the promotion of English worldwide.¹

Notions of the superiority of English and its suitability as the international language *par excellence* have a long pedigree. A detailed study of images of English through history concludes that “the linguistic ideas that evolved at the acme of empires led by Britain and the United States have not changed as economic colonialism has replaced the direct, political management of third world nations. English is still believed to be the inevitable world language: reasons for the prominent place of English in global affairs are the same ones that were first elaborated in the nineteenth century” (Bailey 1991, 121).²

A recent example of jingoist triumphalism is provided by a front page campaign in a London tabloid in November 1991, at a time when the British Government's commitment to the European Union was lukewarm and British influence on European integration minimal: “If Europe is to have a future, it needs more than a common currency, a common foreign policy and a common set of laws. It must have a common language. That language can only be English” (Daily Mail, 29 November 1991).

States that resist the advance of English and claim equal rights for their languages are branded as “chauvinist”, suffering from “obsolescent national pride”. The underlying belief seems to be that if English has been successfully imposed as the dominant language in states such as the UK and the USA, the same processes could apply at the continental, European level and globally. If monolingualism can triumph nationally (so it is seen), why not internationally too?

Whose Interests Do International Languages Serve?

What has been happening in my lifetime
is the Americanization of the world.
(George Bernard Shaw, born 1856, writing in 1912)

The British government is well aware of the political benefits that accrue to Britain as a result of the privileged position of English,³ and the resulting economic impact.⁴ The media applaud in the same spirit.⁵ There is a steady stream of books on various aspects of English worldwide, not all of which are naively celebratory.⁶ A recent publication commissioned by the British Council on the future of English (Graddol, 1997) is a reflective, multi-dimensional analysis that assesses the role of various factors, economic, technological and political, that might in future propel other languages forward as dominant international languages.

The present context is one of McDonalidization, of structural asymmetry due to economic might, symbolized by the fact that 80% of films shown in western Europe are of Californian origin, whereas 2% of films shown in North America are of European origin. McDonalidization can be seen as creating global customers, services and suppliers; “aggressive round-the-clock marketing, the controlled information flows that do not confront people with the long-term effects of an ecologically detrimental lifestyle, the competitive advantage against local cultural providers, the obstruction of local initiative, all converge into a reduction of local cultural space” (Hamelink, 1994). A number of measures have been taken so as to attempt to counteract this influence at the European Union level and at the national level, particularly by France, the goal being to protect cultural and linguistic diversity: this is an area in which the relationship between economic factors, culture and language policy is being explored, but needs further elaboration (Grin & Hennis-Pierre, 1997).

Commercial and media globalizing pressures dovetail with the work of educationalists who are promoting “global education”. There are scholars who foresee a global core curriculum in a globalized education system, complete with a global qualifications system and global arrangements for quality assurance in education and training.⁷ The proposed global core curriculum names seven key domains of learning, one of which is the “world-language”, which is imperative for all, i.e. English; a second relates to other languages, which those unhappy enough to be born without English as their mother tongue need to learn.⁸ Effectively, this educational vision posits two human types: monolingual English-speakers, and bilingual others. It is a recipe for a return to an antediluvian pre-Babel world where everything of value is generated in a single language.

The Diffusion of English, or the Ecology of Language?

Globalization is not a phenomenon that has emerged recently, though fashions in academia might create this impression. What is novel is the extent and depth of the penetration of cultures worldwide. Many of the dimensions of contemporary language policy are insightfully brought together in two competing paradigms by the Japanese communications scholar, Yukio Tsuda.

Diffusion of English Paradigm

- A. – capitalism
- B. – science and technology
- C. – modernization
- D. – monolingualism
- E. – ideological globalization and internationalization
- F. – transnationalization
- G. – Americanization and homogenization of world culture
- H. – linguistic, cultural and media imperialism

Ecology of Language Paradigm

- 1. – a human rights perspective
- 2. – equality in communication
- 3. – multilingualism
- 4. – maintenance of languages and cultures
- 5. – protection of national sovereignties
- 6. – promotion of foreign language education.

(Tsuda, 1994, our lettering and numbering, for elaboration see Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999).

The two contrasting perceptions of what is at stake can be seen in relation to language policy in Africa, where some forces are strengthening the diffusion of English, others local language ecologies. Mazrui (1997) assesses how it is that the linguistic hierarchies of the colonial period continue to underpin World Bank and IMF education policies, currently setting the tone for “aid” alongside notoriously anti-social, poverty-inducing structural adjustment policies: “the World Bank’s real position ... encourages the consolidation of the imperial languages in Africa... the World Bank does not seem to regard the linguistic Africanisation of the whole of primary education and beyond as an effort that is worth its consideration. Its publication on strategies for stabilising and revitalising universities, for example makes absolutely no mention of the place of language at this tertiary level of African education. ... under World Bank-IMF structural adjustment programmes, the only path open to African nations is the adoption of the imperial languages from the very outset of a child’s education”. (Mazrui, 1997, 39-40)

Educational “aid” reflects the linguist⁹ belief that only “international” (meaning European) languages are suited to the task of developing African economies and minds. The falsity of this position has been exposed by many African scholars, including Ansre, Bamgbose, Kashoki, Mateene, and Ngũgĩ (references in Phillipson 1992; see also Djité 1993; and especially on language rights in Africa, Akinnaso 1994; and Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1994).

An alternative approach, based on strengthening African languages, can be seen in a succession of policy documents approved by African governments over the past 15 years, culminating in “The Harare Declaration”, agreed at the Intergovernmental Conference of Ministers on Language Policies in Africa, 20-21 March 1997 (reproduced in the New Language Planning Newsletter, 11/4, June 1997). It affirms that appropriate policies that build on African languages have not been implemented, and outlines many strategies for strengthening the local language ecology. It sees the promotion of African languages as central to processes of democratization and peaceful coexistence: “... the optimal use of African languages is a prerequisite for maximizing African creativity and resourcefulness in development activities.

... Africa where scientific and technological discourse is conducted in the national languages as part of our cognitive preparation for facing the challenges of the next millennium.

... (African governments) appeal to all concerned in Africa and throughout the world to engage in a clear and forthright cooperation, with respect for the integrity of African identity and the harmonious promotion of human values and dignity as given expression in African languages.”

World Bank policies, and donor activities in harmony with them, consolidate the diffusion of English. The Harare Declaration by contrast seeks to strengthen African language ecologies, to build on the existing multilingualism, and to harness local languages for the solution of local problems. English can still be learned as a foreign language but would not be learned subtractively or used intrusively.

These samples of discourse on language policy need to be situated in political realities. To assess linguistic hierarchies globally, in postcolonial, postcommunist or European Union contexts, one needs to look at economic and political factors, at how resources are allocated to one or some languages rather than others, at ideologies that legitimate such preferences and which tend to glorify some languages and stigmatize others. Theories of language and power, of language policy or social structuring, of language in educational reproduction, need anchoring in the complex real world of cash and hegemonic negotiation. It is a world in which inequality is structured and legitimated by linguicism. The “international” language English is regarded as universally relevant, despite the abundant evidence that its widespread use in post-colonial contexts has served western interests well (which is what globalization seeks to achieve) and not met the needs of the mass of the population in such countries.

An ecology of language paradigm has a different starting-point. It assumes that speakers of different languages have an equal right to communicate, that multilingualism is desirable and worth encouraging and facilitating, and that language policy should be guided by principles of equity and human rights.

A Utopian Intermezzo: Proposals for a Genuinely Neutral International Language, Esperanto, in the League of Nations and the European Parliament

Remember that the sole means of achieving peace
is to abolish for ever the main cause of
wars, the survival since the most distant
pre-civilization world of antiquity of the
domination by one people of other peoples.
(Zamenhof, 1915, cited in Centassi & Masson, 1995)

The League of Nations was created as a forum to work for the avoidance of military conflagrations like World War I. Membership fluctuated at between forty and fifty states, whereas in the United Nations at present there are roughly 200. The United States remained outside the League of Nations, despite the key role played by President Wilson in the founding of the organization.

The League of Nations had to consider what languages its deliberations should be conducted in. French had hitherto served as the primary diplomatic language (at least in the western world), though not at all “international” conferences. At the Universal Esperanto Association conferences prior to 1914 some governments were officially represented, no fewer than 11 at the conference in 1910 (Centassi & Masson, 1995).

Serious consideration is seldom given by international organizations to the use of a planned language, a neutral one that is not associated with a particular power, a language that is easy for anyone to learn. Esperanto tends to be rejected without serious consideration of why it could represent an alternative to a “natural” language.¹⁰

The possibility of the League of Nations encouraging Esperanto and even adopting it as a working language was considered seriously, but met fierce resistance on the part of France. Esperanto was discussed several times between 1920 and 1924, and consideration was given to reports of the experience of learning the language in 26 countries. Delegates of eleven states (Belgium, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Czechoslovakia, Haiti, India, Italy, Persia, South Africa) recommended in 1920 that Esperanto should be learned in schools “as an easy means of international understanding” (Lins, 1988, 49-61). Smaller states, including some Asian ones, favoured a neutral international language. But the forces behind the languages of the big member states had their way. The existing world order might have been threatened not only by a neutral language but also by the pacifist utopian political beliefs embraced by some Esperantists.¹¹ The Esperanto option was rejected, a pattern that holds to this day, apart from some nominal recognition and consultative status at the UN and UNESCO and the International PEN Club.

There is a copious literature on Esperanto. Among the most relevant sociolinguistic facts are that several thousand children worldwide are growing up (in over 2000 families) with Esperanto as one of their mother tongues; that fiction flourishes, novels and poetry in the original as well as in translation; that it is used as the medium for frequent scientific conferences on many topics; that the language can be learned much faster than other languages because of the regular, productive rules underlying it; that although it mainly draws on European basic vocabulary, its systematicity makes it easier for non-Europeans to learn than European languages; that proficiency in Esperanto enables its speakers to meet people from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In inter-personal communication, the absence of links between Esperanto and any nation-state may facilitate symmetrical communication, irrespective of the mother tongue of the speakers. At the inter-state level, in political institutions which debate the fate of the world's population, lack of political clout is of course the primary weakness of the language. It is the powerful states that can require that their languages have "official" status.

The concept of an official language in supra-state organizations dates from the early years of the League of Nations, when French and English were granted equal status, and in so doing established "the fiction – that a text written in 'language' can be rendered into any number of 'languages' and that the resultant renderings are entirely equal as to meaning" (Tonkin, 1996, 14).

The same principle of textual equivalence applies in the European Union with its 11 official languages, with in theory the "same" semantic content being expressed in each. Anyone familiar with translation processes and products knows that squaring the circle of conceptual, cultural and linguistic difference is a utopian ideal that is remote from how different realities operate. For instance, the legal systems in each of the 15 member states of the European Union have evolved in uniquely distinct ways and texts can never mean precisely "the same" in each language and culture.

There are, however, forces attempting to persuade the European Parliament to consider the Esperanto option seriously, and an increasing number of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are reportedly interested in debate on such matters. A hearing was held in 1993, and one on broader issues of language policy is planned.¹² This ultimately reflects the fact that supra-national EU institutions are, in principle, committed to multilingualism and linguistic equality, though the current linguistic hierarchy militates against this: some languages are more equal than others, especially French and English in EU fora.

The Universal Esperanto Association is attempting to influence language policy in international organizations. The Manifesto approved at its 81st World Congress in Prague in 1996 enumerates a number of principles that the movement for the "international language Esperanto" stands for. These cover democracy, global education (ethnic inclusiveness), effective education (better foreign-language learning), multilingualism, language rights, language diversity and human emancipation. The two most relevant principles in the present connection are:

Democracy. Any system of communication which confers lifelong privileges on some while requiring others to devote years of effort to achieving a lesser degree of competence is fundamentally antidemocratic. While Esperanto, like any language, is not perfect, it far outstrips other languages as a means of egalitarian communication on a world scale. We maintain that language inequality gives rise to communicative inequality at all levels, including the international level. *We are a movement for democratic communication.*

Language Rights. The unequal distribution of power among languages is a recipe for permanent language insecurity, or outright language oppression, for a large part of the world's population. In the Esperanto community the speakers of languages large and small, official and unofficial, meet on equal terms through a mutual willingness to compromise. This balance of language rights and responsibilities provides a benchmark for developing and judging other solutions to language inequality and conflict. We maintain that the wide variations in power among languages undermine the guarantees, expressed in many international instruments, of equal treatment regardless of language. *We are a movement for language rights.*

It is only fair to add that I have only become aware of the potential of Esperanto quite recently, meaning that like most sociolinguists I have not taken it seriously hitherto. In addition to the intellectual arguments summarized here, I had the experience of attending two "international" conferences in the summer of 1996. At the Language Rights conference held in Hong Kong, English was virtually the sole means of communication. A South African participant expressed surprise that those whose competence in English was less than ideal, particularly Asians who had great difficulty in expressing themselves in English, accepted the unequal communication rights imposed on them by the conference organizers. At the

Universal Esperanto Association's 81st World Congress in Prague a few weeks later, it was amazing to experience several thousand participants from all over the world communicating confidently in a shared international language, among them a number of Asians who were manifestly at no disadvantage.

Language Rights in Supra-statal Organizations

Certain languages are assigned preferential rights in international fora, such as the UN, military or trading alliances, bodies that control such international concerns as shipping and air traffic, and professional associations. These typically operate in one or more official languages. The language that has increasingly imposed itself this century is English, accompanying technological and communication revolutions, and reflecting political, economic and military power. While the hierarchies of language in postcolonial contexts have been subjected to much analysis, international language policy in the sense of the functioning of languages in international organizations is “little studied and little understood” (Tonkin 1996, 9; see also Coulmas 1996; Fettes, 1996).¹³

Studies of the operation of the UN language system over a period of years by Tonkin (1996) and Fettes (1996) indicate that the present language regime reflects political power rather than any principle of equity (e.g. those languages with most speakers, or a representative selection from the global language ecology) or efficiency. Thus four languages, all of European origin (English, French, Russian, Spanish), were accepted as the official languages of the UN in 1945, since which time there has been sufficient weight behind Arabic (after the oil crisis of 1973) and Chinese (of major demographic and geopolitical importance) to ensure their addition.

In theory there are six official languages with equal rights at the United Nations, and a huge amount of documentation is produced in these languages by an expensive translation service. In practice, English is the *de facto* dominant working language, and this is covertly accepted at the UN. Dissatisfaction has been expressed by the French-speaking powers at the UN, but to no avail, and their protest has little to do with equity or the rights of languages other than French.¹⁴ There is major resistance to reform of the system, as it reflects a set of political compromises, attachment to the system by those who operate it, and a reluctance to consider alternatives.

Possible alternatives suggested by Tonkin (1996, 22-24) might involve more overt acceptance of the use of a single language, either English or Esperanto, or a greater focus on language learning and receptive multilingualism, or a system by which language services could be available on demand and for payment. At present there is no indication that there is any willingness to alter the system, despite the fact that the UN is looking to cut costs and as much as a quarter of the UN working budget is spent on the interpretation and translation services (Fettes 1996, 119). The system is inefficient because many speakers are less than fluent and comprehensible in one of the official languages, because of logistic problems in providing interpretation into the designated official languages, and because of waste when texts are translated into all the official languages without extensive use being made of them. As a former interpreter in the UN system notes, it is paradoxical to devote substantial funds to such matters when the UN's primary activities such as peace-keeping, health care, and the promotion of human rights are under-funded (Piron 1994).

It seems fair to conclude that the present system of assigning rights to certain languages effectively deprives speakers of other languages of equal access to the system. In addition, selecting a certain number of languages does not mean that there is no hierarchy among those selected – quite the opposite.

In the European Union, language policy is such a political hot potato that few concerted high-level initiatives have been taken. Language policy does not have a high profile. Most language policies are covert rather than overt. As the editor of an issue of the *International Political Science Review* on “The emergent world language system” notes: “The subject of languages has been the great *non-dit* of European integration. There was much talk of milk pools and butter mountains, of a unitary currency, of liberalizing movements for EC citizens and restricting access for outsiders, but the language in which these issues were dealt with remained itself a non-issue” (de Swaan, 1993, 244).

There have been few systematic studies of language policy in the EU, and none within an elaborate multi-disciplinary framework. What is currently available is fragmentary, and largely impressionistic. Books on European integration in political science neglect the language issue (e.g. Richardson, 1996). Studies of EU language policy contain analysis of the regulations governing language policy, empirical studies of the use made of particular languages, and attitudes to language use. The pioneer works are by a French Canadian (Labrie 1993), a German (Schlossmacher 1996), and a Norwegian (Simonsen 1996), and

it is doubtless not fortuitous that the first studies are by scholars who come from states who feel that their languages are threatened, in all cases by the advance of English. The books are in French, German and Norwegian, respectively, which may restrict their readership. Many of the issues have, however, been dealt with in English (see the annual *Sociolinguistica*; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1997).

In theory language policy is, like culture, a matter for each member state, but globalization and Europeanization processes, and the intensity of links in so many fields across national borders, many of them encouraged by measures adopted in the EU, make national autonomy in some measure illusory. For EU institutions the most significant language legislation is the 1958 granting the four dominant languages of the founding states (Dutch, French, German and Italian) equal rights as official and working languages. When new states acceded progressively, their languages were added (Danish and English in 1972, Greek, Portuguese and Spanish a decade later, Finnish and Swedish from 1994). The preamble to the initial decision explains that it is those languages that are official throughout the territory of a state that are eligible as EU languages. This therefore excludes regional languages such as Catalan in Spain, even though it has more speakers than some of the official languages.

Membership of the European "Union" involves a pooling of sovereignty with the other member states. There is therefore a manifest need for written documents that are the outcome of negotiations between the member states (for instance in the Council of Ministers) to be disseminated in each state in the dominant language, since texts (treaties, regulations, etc.) with the force of EU law over-ride national law. Here there is a clear need for optimally close textual equivalence in 11 official languages.

The present system of interpreting into the 11 official languages (11 X 10 possible combinations) is cumbersome, and a system of relay interpretation, e.g. from Danish to Greek via French or English, is often in operation (Dollerup, 1996). In principle each of the 11 languages has the same right to be used as a working language: in practice speakers of "small" languages often waive their rights and operate in one of the "big" languages. Often draft texts are only available in French or English.

It is probable that the equality of official languages has always been a fiction. French was in the early years the dominant language of the EU Commission in Brussels, and still is so in some domains. The Germans accepted this, even though political and business leaders periodically complain that German interests suffer as a consequence of German not enjoying *de facto* the same rights.

Most of the explicit language policy agendas are minimalist, aiming at some kind of equity among the 11 official languages. EU schemes for promoting student mobility aim to strengthen competence in foreign languages in the member countries and the formation of "European" identity. In theory, the architects of Europeanization proclaim that cultural and linguistic diversity are to be maintained. However, the reality is more complex, as regards both the use of all national languages at the supra-national level and the status and rights of minority languages in each state. In addition, English is impacting on national languages. In EU institutions English is expanding at the expense of other potential lingua francas, French and German in particular. The less "international" languages of the other member states have few rights in practice. There is, in other words, tacit acceptance of a hierarchy of EU languages.

How EU language policy will evolve is difficult to predict. There are many unanswered questions: is the EU moving towards diglossia, with English as a second language for elites other than the Brits and the Irish who will remain mostly monolingual? Or can a more substantial degree of multi-directional and reciprocal multilingualism be established? Will EU institutions continue with a cumbersome system of translation and interpretation, or will they re-think their policy for working languages and the drafting of texts? This is likely when the EU expands to take in new members. Are current schemes that fund student mobility (Erasmus, Socrates etc) achieving their declared goal of strengthening the less widely used EU languages, or are they in fact boosting English?¹⁵ Is there any informed discussion of the viability of alternatives such as Esperanto? Which constituencies exercise most influence on language policy formation, national or supra-national elites, professional bodies, or mythology generated in the media world and political discourse? Is it fair to assume that the political sensitivity of the issues, coupled with the fragility of the infrastructure, nationally and supra-nationally, for guaranteeing informed public debate about those issues, means that market forces will progressively strengthen English? And if this happens will it necessarily be at the expense of (speakers of) other languages?

Much is at stake, at multiple levels (individual, regional, societal, global) and in many domains (cultural, economic, political, etc.), both in local linguistic ecologies and at a macro, European level.

Empirical studies indicate that it is only French and English that effectively function as official and working languages in internal EU affairs (Schlossmacher 1996, data collected in 1992). Northern Europeans tend to use English, southern Europeans French. English predominates as the means of

communication externally (e.g. with EFTA countries, and even with post-communist states, where German has traditionally been strong). Quell's more recent study (1997) confirms this picture. Competence in French and English is a condition for adequate participation in political decision-making, even in the European Parliament, where interpretation services are more widely available, and greater use is made of many languages, at least in plenary sessions of the Parliament.

When asked whether regulations on a new system of working languages were needed, a large proportion of the bureaucrats employed by the EU indicated that they would welcome this (78%), whereas far fewer MEPs would (41%, Schlossmacher 1996, 98). It is typically those from "small" language groups (e.g. Danish and Portuguese) who do not wish for change, presumably because of the risk of their language being marginalized even further than is already the case.

The same study also shows a large proportion wishing German to be used as a language with top priority and status, rather than a system with only English, or only French and English, as working languages, even if this is not currently the case (ibid. 103). Quell's informants were also asked whether a possible formalized resolution of the issue of working languages in the EU would be a one-, two- or three-language system, and if so, which of the 11 languages should be granted this status. The results show a marked preference for a bilingual (French and English) or a trilingual (English, French and German) system rather than a monolingual one. They also suggest that there is more support for an English-only system among users of English as a second language than among native speakers.¹⁶

Schlossmacher's study also reveals a wide range of views on whether new member states should necessarily have the same language rights as do member states under the present scheme of things. Again, the pattern is that fewer bureaucrats than MEPs seem to believe incoming languages/states should have the same rights.¹⁷ It is more than likely that decisions on language policy will be taken when new states are added, if only because additional languages will complicate immensely the logistics of simultaneous interpretation. Does this mean that in the EU of the future, at meetings attended by heads of state, senior and middle-level bureaucrats, politicians and experts, there will be no right to operate in the mother tongue? When admitted to the European club (a club whose rules have the force of law in each member state), will speakers of Czech, Estonian, Hungarian and Polish only be heard speaking English and French? Answers to these questions are anyone's guess at present, but they raise a fundamental issue: is the EU really a democratic partnership of member states with equal rights?

As the present policy is one of inaction, "regulation by default... the only language which stands to gain is English. Considering the fact that most people do not wish to see English gain more ground, it is curious that it is, nonetheless, establishing itself as the dominant language of the European bureaucracy" (Quell 1997, 71).

English has, over the past quarter century, acquired the status of a supra-national language in the EU comparable to its position in the UN and many postcolonial states, and reflecting its position as the language of Americanization and McDonaldisation. This has consequences for the ecology of the languages of the EU that are likely to become increasingly visible over the coming decades. English has a hegemonic position as an international language that international law, including human rights law, has no means of counteracting, whatever is stated in covenants about the unacceptability of discrimination on the grounds of language (for the limitations of these see Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994b).

International Linguistic Hegemony

English linguistic hegemony is asserted in multiple ways. Some of them reflect economic strength. The diffusion of English depends less on military force (though "peace-keeping" in Bosnia strengthens and diversifies English) than on commercial pressures, not least those of transnational corporations and global and regional organizations such as the EU.

Clearly linguistic hierarchies at the international level do not correlate in a straightforward way with national demographic or economic strength. German has the most native speakers of any language group in the EU, the largest internal market and the strongest economy, as well as some extra-national functioning, but there is little sign that German will be able to compete with English.

English also benefits through foreign-language learning confirming the international linguistic hierarchy. So as to be able to compete in the global market-place, states whose languages are competing lingua francas – France, Germany and Spain – invest heavily in the learning of English in state education, even though the language is regarded as a threat to local cultural and linguistic values.¹⁸

International scientific collaboration is also increasingly dominated by English. Peripheral areas are vulnerable to collaborative ventures underpinned by scientific and linguistic imperialism:¹⁹ there are asymmetrical relations in academic discourse that the status of English consolidates, and a hierarchy of research paradigms that is often legitimated and internalized unquestioningly.

The top language benefits through the image-making of the ads of transnational corporations and the connotations of English with success and hedonism. These symbols are reinforced by an ideology that glorifies the dominant language and serves to stigmatize others, this hierarchy being rationalized and internalized as normal and natural, rather than as expression of hegemonic values and interests.²⁰

The diffusion of English is clearly visible in post-colonial language policies that ignore the local language ecology. Western scholarly studies of the sociology of language often reflect an asymmetrical relationship, as a review of a book by a North American on language policy indicates: "This is a typical specimen of Indian and Western collaboration: superficial and patronizing... By ignoring scholarship in India's regional languages on India's language issues, we are missing vital insights. The English language provides us just one dimension, one perspective and one window." (Kachru 1996, 138, 140).

Globally these trends and many others that are an integral part of McDonaldization, have led to a tendency for both elite and marginal groups to desire competence in English for the obvious reason that English is seen to open doors. The appeal of English should not obscure the fact that in Africa as a whole 90% of the population speak only African languages. Likewise in India figures for the number of speakers of English are 3-5%. If the citizens of countries worldwide are to contribute to the solution of local problems, to use the local environment for locally appropriate purposes, cultural, economic and political, this must involve local languages. Language policy must reconcile these dimensions of language ecology with the pressures of globalization and supranationalization that are propelling English forward. Language policy must be made explicit, and must embrace equitable conditions for all people and all languages. There is a case for international human rights law to be extended so as to control the invasion of dominant international languages.

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¹ A key policy document, "The diffusion of English culture outside England. A problem of post-war reconstruction" (Routh, 1941), was produced by an adviser to the British Council, a body established in the 1930s to promote English and to counteract the successful promotion of their languages by fascist governments. This was a blueprint for the creation of the global English-teaching profession that came into being in the late 1950s and has expanded dramatically since.

The Americans poured money into education systems in "Third World" countries, and not least the English as a Second Language profession: "... the expenditure of large amounts of government and private foundation funds in the period 1950-1970, perhaps the most ever spent in history in the propagation of a language" (Troike, a director of the Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC, 1977).

² These notions relate to its form (an amalgam of several, primarily European languages) and its role as a medium for Christianity, literature, wealth, technology, science, progress, etc. "Dissent from the imperial theme is rare even today" (Bailey, 1991, p. 116). There is a long and still vibrant tradition of pretending "to offer evidence for anglophone superiority in all fields of human endeavor. Many have justified the most pernicious forms of injustice. Few withstand rigorous and dispassionate scrutiny" (ibid, 287).

³ Malcom Rifkind, when British Foreign Secretary: Britain is a "global power with worldwide interests thanks to the Commonwealth, the Atlantic relationship and the growing use of the English language" (reported in *The Observer*, 24.9.1995).

⁴ The British Council's "English 2000" project, launched in 1995, reports in its publicity material that it aims to "exploit the position of English to further British interests, as one aspect of maintaining and expanding the role of English as the world language into the next century... Speaking English makes people open to Britain's cultural achievements, social values and business aims."

⁵ *The Sunday Times*, London, 10.7.1994: The way of salvation for the French language is for English to be taught as vigorously as possible as the second language in all its schools... Only when the French recognize the dominance of AngloAmerican English as the universal language in a shrinking world can they effectively defend their own distinctive culture... Britain must press ahead with the propagation of English and the British values which stand behind it.

⁶ The flood of recent books on globalization and English can be broadly classified as:

regional (e.g. *Linguistic ecology. Language change and linguistic imperialism in the Pacific region*. Mühlhäusler, Routledge; *South Asian English*, ed. Baumgardner, Illinois UP)

comparative (*Post-imperial English: Status change in former British and American colonies, 1940-1990*, ed. Fishman, Conrad & Rubal-Lopez, Mouton de Gruyter; *Language policies in English-dominant countries*, Herriman/Burnaby, Multilingual Matters)

triumphalist (*English as a global language*, Crystal, Cambridge UP)

analytical (*The politics of English as an international language*, Pennycook, Longman; *Problematizing English in India*, Agnihotra & Khanna, Sage; *Linguistic imperialism*, Phillipson, Oxford)

radical-critical (*The otherness of English. India's auntie tongue syndrome*, Dasgupta, Sage; *De-hegemonizing language standards. Learning from (post)colonial Englishes about 'English'*, Parakrama, Macmillan)

predictive (*The future of English*, Graddol, British Council).

⁷ These are the highlights of the abstract of the paper given by the President of the British Association for International and Comparative Education, Sir Christopher Ball, at the Third Oxford Conference on Education and Development, 1995.

⁸ The domains of learning are

- (i) learning how to learn
- (ii) the world-language
- (iii) the mother-tongue (if different from ii)
- (iv) numeracy
- (v) cultural literacy
- (vi) social skills
- (vii) religion, ethics and values.

⁹ Linguicism is defined as "ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language" (Skutnabb-Kangas 1988).

¹⁰ Zamenhof himself quoted Ovid with reference to people who reject Esperanto without being familiar with its potential or reality: "Ignoti nulla cupido" = One does not wish for what one is ignorant of (quoted in Centassi & Masson 1995).

¹¹ In the autumn of 1915 Zamenhof wrote an article entitled "After the Great War – an appeal to diplomats", a kind of political testament. He propounded four principles (Centassi & Masson 1995, 329-331):

All countries belong to their inhabitants and those who have settled there (naturalized). No people should, within a country, exercise rights or have duties which are superior or inferior to those of other peoples.

Everyone has the inalienable right to use the language of his/her choice and to practice whatever religion they prefer.

The government of each country is responsible for all injustices committed (by it/in its name) before a permanent European Tribunal constituted with the consent of all the European countries.

No country and no province should bear the name of a people but rather a name which is geographically neutral and freely accepted by all the other peoples.

¹² "Das Kommunikations- und Sprachenproblem in der Europäischen Gemeinschaft – in wie weit könnte eine Plansprache zu seiner Lösung beitragen?", European Parliament, Brussels, 29 September 1993, organized by the Hanns Seidel Foundation. A second hearing has been planned by the Working Group on the Language Problems of the European Union. Details can be obtained from the Universala Esperanto-Asocio, Nieuwe Binnenweg 176, 3015 BJ Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

¹³ The Center for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems, based at the University of Hartford, USA and associated with the journal *Language problems and language planning*, has organized a series of conferences at the UN on language policy (for references see Tonkin, 1996).

¹⁴ See the General Assembly resolution of 2 November 1995 reported in Fettes, 1996, 130.

¹⁵ For decades the Council of Europe has advocated the learning of two foreign languages. The EU Commission in its White Paper on Education and Training (COM(95) 590 of 29.11.1995) recommends the learning of at least two Community foreign languages by all young people, and a variety of measures to strengthen foreign language learning. Many schoolchildren in Europe are already doing so,

and most EU governments other than the British are willing to endorse the principle of learning two foreign languages.

¹⁶ While meticulous and cautious in his analysis, Quell inclines to the view that L2 speakers are “ideal agents of change because not only are they highly motivated but as they are supporting a language to which they are not tied in a primary national and cultural sense, they are unlikely to be perceived to be supporting a policy for selfish nationalistic reasons.” (Quell, 1997, 70)

While this may be a valid conclusion for this investigation, putting it in a broader context may reduce its generalizability. Schlossmacher's research indicates that EU bureaucrats are much less insistent than MEPs on maintaining their right to use the L1 in EU institutions.

¹⁷ To some extent this “result” might be an artefact of the questionnaire exercise, since informants inevitably had to interpret statements that can be understood in various ways, however carefully drafted. And is “Amtssprache” an exact equivalent of “official” language?

¹⁸ For details of change in foreign language learning in EU countries over the past half century, and analysis of the implications for choice of language in interpersonal communication see Labrie & Quell, 1997.

¹⁹ There are lively debates in Hungarian social science journals about the unequal relationship between North American researchers and their Hungarian “partners”: see the special issue of *replika* “Colonisation or partnership? Eastern Europe and western social sciences”, 1996. I am grateful to Miklós Kontra for drawing my attention to this.

²⁰ A recent example of this: a senior British Council officer regards the contemporary dominance of English in key domains of globalization as comparable to water running downhill and the sun rising in the East, and that granted this social reality, it “is legitimate and inevitable that native English-speaking countries will seek to turn this reality to national advantage...” (Seaton, 1997, 381).