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ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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In 1998, Jonathan Pool and Mark Fettes published “The Challenge of Interlingualism: A Research Invitation” (Pool & Fettes 1998; see also Fettes 2003a & 2003b; Tonkin 2006). Their goal was to lay out a range of options for the promotion of interlingual communication and to challenge the research community to explore these options in a serious way. Pool had earlier published a number of articles in which he suggested that different approaches to the bridging of linguistic difference could be assessed in terms of costs and benefits, and that various methods of compensation could be applied to offset the gains and losses of particular groups in the language regime chosen as a result of such analysis (Pool 1987, 1996; see also Van Parijs 2005). Pool’s work paralleled that of such scholars as François Vaillancourt and François Grin (Vaillancourt 1983; Grin 2004, 2005), who had applied these principles in assessing approaches to, for example, bilingualism in Canada.

Pool and Fettes laid out “five variants of interlingualism that appear to have acquired a significant literature and a corps of advocates, researchers and practitioners.” The five were:

World English: “The most widespread second language of the present day, English, might make the world interlingual by becoming so well integrated in educational and social systems worldwide that it was accessible to all at minimal cost.”

Esperantism: “An invented language (not necessarily Esperanto itself), designed as a global auxiliary language in which fluency can be achieved at low cost, might make the world interlingual.”

Language Brokers: “Professional translators and interpreters might achieve an interlingual world by enabling people without a common language to communicate with success, despite greatly dissimilar experiences and beliefs.”

Plurilingualism: “A world in which knowing many languages is as normal as knowing many people might be an interlingual world” especially if breakthroughs in language learning could be achieved.

Technologism: “Invention might resolve the apparent incompatibilities of interlingualism ... if the intricacies of grammar, meaning, and communicative strategy could be understood and codified.”

We can see these five approaches as exclusive options or as elements in a language policy that might employ several of them in complementary ways.

Serious examination of these alternative strategies for dealing with the existence of widespread linguistic diversity across the world is posited on three broad assumptions. The first assumption is that organizations and their member states might be willing to step back and take a rational approach to the issue; currently, the success of certain languages and the retreat of others, for example in the European Union or at the United Nations, has occurred in large part because of a failure to take a disinterested look at the gains and losses resulting from particular policies. The preferred strategy appears to be to allow the exercise of a free linguistic market in which the strong languages push out the weak and the sole determining factor is economics rather than culture – as though language is a mere instrument of communication rather than an important factor in personal or cultural identity (see, for example, Calvet 2002).

The second assumption is that a rational examination of options would have a decisive effect on received opinion and would lead to a measure of consensus. In fact, however, received opinion is in many cases deeply invested in the status quo. Finally, the third assumption is that, if consensus emerged, the political will would exist to take firm action. Once again, the “reality on the ground” would seem to suggest otherwise.

In many respects, the first of Pool and Fettes’ options – World English – is gaining ground by default (see, for example, Graddol 1997, Graddol & Meinhof 1999, Bruthiaux 2003). It is reinforced by the fact that English is the language of the world’s principal economic and scientific power and that the ideological leadership established by the United States has persuaded others to adopt English as the language of modernization, of technology, of free markets, and of open democratic systems (we might take issue with any one of these assumptions, but they tend to dominate the thinking of the international elite that has coalesced around technology and markets). The dominance of the United States is, of course, especially significant given the earlier role of the British Empire in spreading English, a fact that continues to play an important role in many parts of the world. The adoption of English has, as one would expect, put a huge burden on the educational systems of non-English-speaking countries, which must devote time and resources to teaching English to their young people, and has removed a burden from the English-speaking countries, for whom English-language teaching is a lucrative industry and who do not need to put the same educational emphasis on learning foreign languages. Indeed, as long as English-language economic strength continues and as long as such strong-arm tactics remain politically acceptable, native English speakers may find it more advantageous to force others to learn English than to have English speakers learn other languages, which has the effect of weakening English-language hegemony. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the rapid progress being made in many countries in the learning of English, and the establishment of English as a second language of international communication (Crystal 1997). A majority even of competent English speakers today would appear to consist of non-native speakers (Graddol 2006), and English is far and away the most widely studied foreign language. This is important, in that it has serious implications not only for issues of language dominance and domination, but also for

issues of what might be called “language ownership.” For the first time in history, a major world language is spoken, and often spoken quite well, by non-native speakers of the language. Thus, even as English native speakers may feel comfortable with the spread and dominance of their language, their own control over the language may be loosening.

Nevertheless, the effect of this process of the spread of English is to push even countries with powerful languages into a position of inferiority: despite the occasionally positive messages from France or Italy, languages like French, German and Italian have lost ground internationally; Russian, while still widely used in such countries as Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, has largely lost the international currency it once enjoyed (see, for example, Ammon 1991, 1995, 1998, 2001). The Chinese government has launched an international effort to promote the learning of Chinese, but it is not clear that it will do much to change the overall international linguistic landscape. France, Germany, Italy, and Spain are increasingly discovering what countries with less widely diffused languages have long known: language study is a massive burden on the educational system, and the maintenance of a national identity and a national culture are increasingly threatened by the gradual conquest of language domains by the English language.

Another concern that needs to be raised at this point has to do with minority language rights (see Phillipson 2000; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 1995; Reagan 2005:45-58; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson 1995). Such rights, accepted by both the United Nations and the EU, focus on minority language rights within countries, but also have broader implications as well. It is also the case, unfortunately, that minority language rights may be far better observed in name than in actual practice, and there are a number of obvious reasons for this situation. Not only are issues of national identity involved, but minority language rights also have implications for virtually every social domain: health care, politics, citizenship, and especially education. Such rights are grounded, as Joel Spring has noted, in the idea that, “It is generally recognized that there is an inseparable relation between language and culture . . . the right to one’s culture requires the right to one’s language” (2000:30). Addressing this issue from a practical political perspective, however, often proves difficult, to say the least, and we are once again left with the challenge of dealing with a multilingual reality, albeit now at the national level. James Tollefson has specifically written about this dilemma, especially in terms of the common commitment to a single national language (comparable, we would suggest, to the Pool and Fettes “World English” option at the international level), by arguing that, “The policy of requiring everyone to learn a single dominant language is widely seen as a common-sense solution to the communication problems of multilingual societies. The appeal of this assumption is such that monolingualism is seen as a solution to linguistic inequality. If linguistic minorities learn the dominant languages, so the argument goes, then they will not suffer economic and social inequality. The assumption is an example of an ideology which refers to normally unconscious assumptions that come to be seen as common sense . . . such assumptions justify exclusionary policies and sustain inequality” (1991:10). There are other, somewhat more complex, cases involving minority languages as well – the best being the generally well-documented cases of users of sign languages in various nations (see Reagan 2002:67-82). This is not, of course, the

forum for a detailed discussion of such issues, but it is, we believe, important that they at least be mentioned here and kept in mind as EU language policy evolves.

Resistance to the gradual erosion of linguistic diversity that we seem to be witnessing comes principally from three overlapping sources. Most people outside areas in which English dominates have long understood that social and economic interactions, often even at the local level, require more than one language; it is really only English speakers who believe that a single language might serve for all levels of communication, in all settings. This very belief in linguistic diversity may make for docile clients for English language classes – but in truth a belief in the desirability of multilingualism, and in the rich diversity of world views and cultural manifestations that it gives rise to, should be accompanied by a lively understanding of the need to promote linguistic diversity as a positive force in the world, not as a curse, but rather, as Einar Haugen once observed, as the “blessings of Babel” (Haugen, 1987).

A second source of resistance to the erosion of linguistic diversity comes from those on the right who believe in the need to reinforce national identity not only by preserving their languages but by resisting “incursions” from outside their countries in the form of immigrants, foreign goods and cultural products, and the like. While some organizations supporting national identity may be benign to the internationalist eye, others quite clearly are not. And what is true of the preservation of *national* identity holds true also of organizations promoting *regional* identity: a belief in regional diversity can easily transform itself into a belief in regional exclusivity, and resistance to centralized metropolitan governance may constitute not grass-roots democracy but reactionary ethnocentrism.

A third source of resistance comes from the other end of the political spectrum and from many people who might be regarded as political centrists. These are people who believe in principles of human rights: numbers of international instruments lay claim to a right to express oneself in one’s native language, to be educated in one’s native language, and to use that language to varying degrees in public life (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson 1995). Although a right to retain one’s ethnic, racial, or religious integrity without prejudicial or discriminatory treatment is widely recognized (though of course not by all states across the world, despite their signatures on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and its later elaborations), a right to retain one’s own language is far less widely acknowledged. And even if it is recognized *within* individual states (Spain, Britain, Finland, Canada, and so on), those states seldom use such arguments in their own international dealings, except for occasional reasons of political opportunism. But just as it is unacceptable to trample on the language rights of individual citizens in many countries, for example of the EU, so it is unacceptable (or should be so considered) to trample on the language rights of entire nations. Resistance to the use of English in international affairs is often viewed as resistance to change, resistance to modernization or even resistance to free markets. It is time to change the rhetoric in this regard: insistence on the use of Polish or Hungarian or Slovakian in EU relations is not, or at least not necessarily, a matter of rightist resistance to change, but a

matter of resistance to cultural irredentism on the part of the speakers and supporters of English and the discriminatory practices that they indulge in.

We are not suggesting that Polish or Hungarian or Slovakian provide solutions to the international communication problems of the European Union, but that they are part of the basic linguistic landscape that the EU must respect and must address: the European Union is a confederation of free-standing states, each with its own profile and each equal to the others. This should be the jumping-off point in the search for a realistic EU language policy.

This language policy may be better served by attention to the other four options that Pool and Fettes present. Progress on computerized translation and interpretation (to cite the last on the list, “technologism”) has been slow, but *computer-assisted* translation has made significant progress and no doubt will continue to do so, as has the related development of speech recognition technology. Nevertheless, the goal of instant automated translation and interpretation services, however alluring, remains at this point a fairly distant goal. In addition, the costs associated with such technology, especially for smaller languages, are bound to be high, as are the skills needed for good human translation and interpretation. The sheer complexity of the translation needs in an organization like the European Union leads to a language regime in which costs are high, corners are cut (for example in the use of relay interpretation, often by way of English), and procedural rules are bent to dispense with translation and interpretation altogether. In this last case, in which informal language brokers are utilized, governments are obliged to find personnel not only accomplished in their fields but also accomplished in English, and these individuals, by definition, derive benefits from the arrangement that tend to perpetuate it.

As for plurilingualism, language learning (other than English-language learning) has made only limited progress, and EU efforts to persuade EU citizens to diversify their language knowledge have not produced significant results, any more than efforts in English-language countries to increase knowledge of other languages have borne significant fruit. Recent policy changes in the UK may actually have moved that country backwards, and, while the numbers of language learners in US schools are up, actual language proficiency remains low. Furthermore, efforts to increase language learning in English-speaking countries, or to increase the learning of languages other than English in non-English-speaking countries, have taken place either in the teeth of popular opinion or without sustained popular support, perhaps because they lack an adequate rationale – an articulated political justification that people can readily identify with. Unless the exclusive focus on the English language can be broken (in part, perhaps, by exposing its fundamentally discriminatory nature) there seems little chance for the expansion of foreign language learning in other directions.

In reviewing the five options articulated by Pool and Fettes we have not addressed the option that they call Esperantism. Let us turn now to this option, and let us use Esperanto, the most widely used constructed language, as an illustration. The language has been in existence and in continuous use for well over a hundred years for every conceivable

purpose, so that any lingering doubts about its adequacy or adaptability for international use could be easily dispelled (Schubert & Maxwell 1989, Janton 1993, Reagan 2005:77-102, Tonkin 1997 & 2006). It is also widely acknowledged, at least anecdotally, that Esperanto is a language more easily acquired by westerners than any other language, and more easily acquired by those from other parts of the world than any other western (or at least Indo-European) language (Maxwell 1988). Accordingly, it is likely that if the resources currently being invested in the acquisition of English across the world were redeployed for the learning of Esperanto, a higher level of Esperanto competence could be acquired at greater speed by the individuals concerned, and the English-speaking world could acquire the needed competence as well. Indeed, by almost any measure, Esperanto makes economic sense internationally if one of the goals is equal linguistic treatment. It also, of course, makes cultural sense, since it is the cultural property of no single state or interest across the world. These rational conclusions are of course offset by the sheer investment in English that has already taken place, as English has emerged as the language particularly of science and technology. But it is our contention that a serious examination of the claims of Esperanto, in the context of a re-examination of international language policies in general, could lead to a hybrid solution that would preserve the functionality of English in scientific fields while allowing for the adoption of Esperanto as a more egalitarian means of handling language difference in general.

Almost thirty years ago, in the course of a paper presented at the 18th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1977, the Australian Ambassador to the United Nations, Ralph Harry, proposed that Esperanto be introduced as the basic language of interpretation and translation and as the language of record at the United Nations. His proposal called for the gradual introduction of Esperanto at the UN side by side with the existing six working languages, the development of an educational program to teach basic Esperanto to diplomats and UN personnel, and a gradual shift, once a passive knowledge of Esperanto became general among the United Nations community, to Esperanto as the sole language of interpretation and also the sole language of record for certain kinds of documents. The result, Harry suggested, would lead to a salutary choice: either (1) a massive reduction in costs, or (2) the expansion of language services to many additional languages without additional cost, since interpretation (for example) would take place in only one direction, regardless of the language used in debate, and hence the number of channels needed would be a fraction of those needed under the current language regime. Ralph Harry's recommendations received some attention at the United Nations, but they were not officially advanced by Australia, nor were they adopted by the United Nations (Harry & Mandel 1979; see also Tonkin 1996).

However, the principle that he recommended, namely that language within the UN be taken out of political contention by shifting to a politically neutral solution, has much to recommend it. We note that Ambassador Harry's intention was not to reduce multilingualism at the UN so much as to expand it and render it more egalitarian. His elegant solution was no match for the investment in the status quo at the UN (a status quo which has resulted in a language policy essentially unchanged for half a century), but it merits reconsideration in the context of EU language policy, which has already reached a level of complexity vastly exceeding that of the United Nations.

In summary, then, the recommendations of Pool and Fettes, incomplete and open to question though they may be (and neither author suggests, here or elsewhere, that these are the only options) merit reexamination. Indeed, say Pool and Fettes, and Ralph Harry before them, all available options should be examined and rational approaches developed. The alternative is the gradual and unequal erosion of linguistic and cultural diversity in ways likely to advantage the strong and disadvantage the weak.

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