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Language Rights

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In June 1996 I attended the International Conference on Language Rights, which was jointly organised by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the Department of Language and Culture, Roskilde University, Denmark. The conference was held in Hong Kong a year before the handover date. Was it a last ditch effort at a kind of political discussion that may be less possible in the future? I never really found out.

Roskilde University is the home of the Language Rights Movement, the base of Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson, who, together and separately, have published numerous books and articles on Language Rights, which promote, among other things, the provision of education in the mother tongue for all, and which decry the dominance of English. Phillipson's book, *Linguistic Imperialism* has put two new terms (*linguistic imperialism* and *linguicism*) into the vocabulary of many sociolinguists. It has also made some English specialists and teachers feel guilty, and others feel cross.

Skutnabb-Kangas gave the keynote address that opened the conference on 22 June. She outlined the kinds of agencies that would be involved in the implementation of language rights, and linked linguicism ("linguistically argued racism") to other discriminatory ideologies and structures which are addressed by existing declarations of human rights. Her handout included an illustration of how language rights could be stated:

A UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF LINGUISTIC HUMAN RIGHTS
SHOULD DECLARE AT AN **INDIVIDUAL** LEVEL,
IN RELATION TO

THE MOTHER TONGUE(S)

that everybody can

- identify with their mother tongue(s) and have this identification accepted and respected by others,
- learn the mother tongue(s) fully, orally (when physiologically possible) and in writing (which presupposes that minorities are educated through the medium of their mother tongue(s)),
- use the mother tongue in most official situations (including schools).

OTHER LANGUAGE

- that everybody whose mother tongue is not an official language in the country where s/he is resident, can become bilingual (or trilingual, if s/he has 2 mother tongues) in the mother tongue(s) and (one of) the official language(s) (according to her own choice).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGES

- that any change of mother tongue is voluntary (includes knowledge of long-term consequences), not imposed.

PROFIT FROM EDUCATION

- that everybody can profit from education, regardless of what her mother tongue is.

There was some very animated discussion of the basic tenets of language rights issues at the conference, with questioning of (and defence of) all of these principles. Admittedly I wasn't a wholehearted supporter of the language rights movement when I arrived at the conference (my own paper was entitled "When mother-tongue education is *not* preferred"). But I have to say that as the conference progressed I felt less and less happy with the implications of the Language Rights movement, which came to seem to me to involve the imposition of a simple concept of language and culture on all societies. The rhetoric of the 'anti-imperialist' language rights activists seemed at times to be a new kind of imperialism which operates with a sense of individuals possessing a fossilised 'culture' which is somehow independent of their situation and is inextricably linked to a language.

One member of the audience drew attention to the neo-imperialism of flying in delegates from Europe to tell Asians what to do. Certainly the rhetoric of the language rights activists often seems to deny the ability of ordinary people to make decisions for themselves.

Let us forget for a moment that existing declarations of human rights are honoured almost nowhere. Instead, imagine that you are in a country where there is a serious effort to recognise human rights. What are the implications of implementing these new language rights in your country? Should it be done? Could it be done?

Does everyone have a mother tongue that they can identify with? People who are ethnically mixed, people whose ancestors have undergone language shift, and those who are bilingual from infancy often have a very weak sense of identification with a 'mother tongue'. I found that the implication of the language rights activists in Hong Kong was often that if you do not speak your ancestral language(s), it means that you or your ancestors have done something wrong (shifted languages without "knowledge of long-term consequences"). I can't accept that. For many people, including migrants and those who live in the cosmopolitan cities of the world (Lagos, Bombay, Singapore, Istanbul, Rio de Janeiro), language shift is an expected part of life. People also have a right to change languages if they think it will confer material or financial benefit. I don't regard ethnically mixed people as broken vessels, or as people without a culture (it has to be confessed that I have a vested interest in regarding ethnic mixing positively).

The language rights activists take the view that identification with the culture of a mother tongue is a necessary component of a self fulfilling life. There is also an implication that

this identification should be linked to one's ancestry and to an ethnically based culture. I have problems here too. Culture is in the here and now, and is not embodied in a codified culture-language complex which is external to daily life. None of us shares the culture of any of our grandparents, because culture, like language, changes (*lif is læne*¹, as my English ancestors would have said a thousand years ago). Many of us do not share the language(s) of our ancestors. What is it that we are supposed to have lost? No-one knows what the long-term consequences of language shift are, but the implication of the language rights activists that they are necessarily negative is surely fallacious. In reality, it varies.

A basic tenet of the language rights movement is that minorities should be educated through the medium of their mother tongue(s). This may be articulated as:

- (a) allowing mother tongue education, or
- (b) requiring governments to provide it, or
- (c) requiring children to have it.

I don't have too many problems with (a), which would allow communities to organise themselves to provide schooling for their children if there is a demand for it and if they can fund it. It may be unequal in the sense that richer and better placed groups would be more able to achieve this than underprivileged ones.

Which brings us to (b), which seems to be the dominant approach. In the conference, various examples of state provision for the languages of minorities were given, though

¹ Old English: = "life is transitory". The other elements in my ancestry that I know about are Highland Scots, Welsh, and tinker.

this was usually in terms of support of the minority language rather than provision of education in it. In his paper, Florian Coulmas defended the right of a government to make decisions which would give special status to some languages, and to consider the financial implications of decisions in providing medium of education. It is hard to imagine in practical terms how a country could provide for facilities for every child to experience mother tongue education.

I have even more problems with (c). This could be a recipe for keeping “the rich man in his castle, the poor man at the gate” and would almost inevitably involve governments in predetermining a child’s mother tongue, probably on the basis of paternal ancestry. Jean D’souza spoke of how the provision of education to child labourers is the main way of combating child labour by empowering the children and breaking the cycle of deprivation. In Pune, agencies take it for granted that the default language of this education is Marathi, the dominant language of the state. The issue is not controversial, and rightly so. Although the children come from many different communities most of them have picked up Marathi in the community. In the Indian situation of widespread multilingualism languages do not compete, and are learnt on a need to know basis. D’souza argued for the primacy of education in a dominant community language over mother tongue education, a view which speakers from the floor (including Skutnabb-Kangas) disputed, with Tope Omoniyi arguing that no education was better than a bad education (where a bad education was one not in the mother-tongue). I’m with D’souza in going for what can contribute to material well being, and in accepting what the community sees as uncontroversial. It is hard to imagine that all languages could be equally privileged in a country, and parents have a vested interest in ensuring that their children learn the remunerative ones. If the government did not predetermine children’s mother tongues, (c)

could lead to language shift (or lies) from parents in order to achieve education in a privileged language for their children,

Our would-be-perfect country cannot also ensure that everyone is able to use the mother tongue in “most official situations”. There are just not enough speakers of minority languages to staff all the schools, post offices, courts, and tax offices....

One of the main reasons for promoting mother tongue education seems to be to reduce the role of English. In his paper Robert Phillipson reiterated how English was responsible for “warping the mind”, and called on governments to regulate the use of languages on the air and over the Internet. My last column dealt with the determinist fallacy that the language controls the mind. Either the ‘warping’ material is in the language itself or it is in the materials written in English. The fact that not all English-speaking societies share a common culture, and the fact that language change and cultural change are inevitable would suggest that the ‘warping’ material is in the texts. In which case the solution is apparently to censor the texts (whether in the original or in translation, presumably), as well as regulating the broadcasts. Of course many countries do make such efforts. But do language rights activists seriously want to suggest that people be denied access to texts that might change their world view? I wonder who will decide which are the worthy texts and which are the warping ones. The language rights activists present the victim of linguistic imperialism as an sponge who uncritically absorbs corrupting material. The Language Rights activists are claiming knowledge, superiority and expertise which they deny to the individual language user, reader, or TV watcher. In promoting language rights they seem to deny other rights.

Alastair Pennycook unravelled the different positions on language rights -- liberal, Marxist, feminist and so on (each position was represented by a coloured piece of paper -- a neat trick I must try to remember). He called for a need to develop “a situated ethics of language possibilities”, a relativistic position which could presumably be illustrated by a grey sheet of paper, but which is the only one I could justify. I’m not going to be out on the streets demonstrating for language rights -- the right of children to an education which will allow them to achieve a decent life and some empowerment is more important than their right to language maintenance. Language contact and language shift are a part of the human experience, and are not to be automatically deplored.

Reference

Phillipson, Robert. 1992. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.