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LINGUISTIC SUSTAINABILITY AND LANGUAGE ECOLOGY¹

1. From ‘sustainability’ to ‘linguistic sustainability’

The concept of ‘sustainability’ clearly comes from the tradition of thinking that criticises a perspective of economic development that overlooks almost totally the natural environment and which thus leads it to a final end devoid of resources and clearly harmful for the life of human beings. The academics and activists that shared this view have worked on the perspective of ‘sustainable development’ or ‘lasting development’ in order to practice an economic and urbanistic development respectful of, integrated into, and in keeping with the dynamics of nature. Such principles provide a way of improving some of the material aspects of human life while at the same time not damaging other environmental aspects still more necessary and fundamental for the quality—and even for the simple possibility—of human existence. In fact, this is a synthesis of possible opposed patterns. It does not renounce material and economic improvement, but nor does it exclude a fully healthy environment that is appropriate for the continuation of the species. It postulates an environmental morality², because the basis of the problem lies, more than in legal dispositions, in the scales of value shared by society and shaped by juridical codification.

¹ Short version of the plenary speech given at the X Linguapax Congress on ‘Linguistic diversity, sustainability and peace’, Forum 2004, Barcelona.

² Jacobs, Jane *The nature of economies*. Toronto: Random House, 2000, p. 67.

If we now try to apply this way of thinking to the linguistic reality, what do we see? Are there analogies to be made? I believe there are, and ones that can be used to good advantage. From the outset, I would underscore the will to connect apparent ‘opposites’ in an integrative conceptualisation, such as the very syntagm ‘sustainable development’. On the sociolinguistic plane, our debate should probably be about our ‘opposites’, which could be on the one hand the glottophagic expansion of the dominant languages and, on the other hand, the maintenance and development of human linguistic diversity.

Let us note that the existing positions tend to polarise on these two aspects. For some, it is necessary for peoples to abandon their original languages and adopt only the great state or global codes of communication in order to be able to advance in their economic and cultural development. For others, the struggle is clearly in favour of the preservation of linguistic diversity and the maintenance of distinct collective identities as a way of avoiding the poverty and anonymity that are the destination of disorganisation of the traditional subsistence ecosystem, and of the continuance of the knowledge and wisdom each culture has produced. These perspectives may seem, at first, to be irreconcilable and antagonistic, wholly impossible to integrate and assemble.

Would there be some way of translating the procedures and the conciliating conceptualisation of ‘sustainability’, of combining the competence and use both of languages of greater communicative scope and of maintaining and promoting group languages? To paraphrase Ramon Folch in an interview on sustainability in general, we could say that *linguistic sustainability should be a process of gradual transformation from the current model of the linguistic organisation of the human species, a transformation whose objective would be to avoid that collective bilingualism or polyglottism of human beings must require the abandonment by different cultural groups of their own languages*. Basically, the ideology opposed to this would come from the negative human tendency for dichotomous thinking: black or white, one language or the

other. Today, however, from the paradigm of complexity,³ we know that there are other possibilities. Why, then, can we not forcefully postulate a morality of maintenance and development of multilingualism similar to that of the maintenance of species and of the natural environment? The personal and groupal benefits of preserving languages (greater self-esteem, greater positive self-image of the group, no shame in origins, etc.), while not easily quantifiable, are important to the happiness of people, as many contemporary cases show us. Large majority groups must generate a sociolinguistic ethics, a system which will guide them in ways of acting that are respectful of linguistic sustainability.

Just as sustainable development does not negate the development and the desire for material improvement of human societies but at one and the same time wants to maintain ecosystemic balance with nature, so ‘linguistic sustainability’ accepts polyglottisation and intercommunication among groups and persons yet still calls for the continuity and full development of human linguistic groups. Just as in the general sustainability framework we think and act in ways intended not to destroy our very biospheric context and intended to save the natural resources we depend on, in linguistic sustainability we want to develop ourselves and intercommunicate with each other without destroying the linguistic and cultural resources that identify us. From a sustainability ethics, the diversity of the ways different groups of the species communicate is clearly a value to protect, and not as an ‘anthropological’ curio but because of the intrinsic and inalienable dignity of human persons and societies.

2. Linguistic contact and sociocultural ecosystems

Another facet of the tenets of sustainability, which we consider important, is naturally its ecosystemic conception of phenomena. The conception that overlooked the settings and

³ See Bastardas i Boada, Albert, ‘Política lingüística mundial a l’era de la globalització: diversitat i intercomunicació des de la perspectiva de la “complexitat”’, *Noves SL. Revista de Sociolingüística / Journal on Sociolinguistics* (on-line journal), 2002, http://www6.gencat.net/lengcat/noves/hm02estiu/metodologia/bastardas1_9.htm (English version: ‘World language policy in the era of globalization: Diversity and intercommunication from the perspective of “complexity”’), http://www6.gencat.net/lengcat/noves/hm02estiu/metodologia/a_bastardas1_9.htm

contexts of things has inevitably entered into crisis, and today we see clearly how intervening in a fact or an element means intervening simultaneously—and above all—in the environment and the context of a fact or an element. What this signifies is that getting right our actions in the framework of linguistic sustainability requires our in-depth knowledge of the fundamental evolutionary dynamics and factors of sociolinguistic ecosystems, both on the local and the global scale. To study the ‘linguosphere’, the ecology of languages should be an ecology based on sociocultural ecosystems and the relations among these ecosystems, because the basic unit is not language but always *the-language-in-its-context*. Making a language sustainable will mean balancing a complex organisation in the framework of which the corresponding code can be provided with a functional niche that is sufficient to guarantee an adequate homeostasis. Sustainability is clearly ecosystemic and dynamic.⁴

From this perspective, it should be clear that languages are thus not simple objects but rather complex ones, emergences produced and maintained at the meeting point of different dimensions. A real language is not only its grammar or its lexis but also living human cognition, interaction, and identification, in the simultaneous intersection of, as Edgar Morin states, the noosphere, the psychosphere and the sociosphere.⁵

Sustainability is thus aware of avoiding a break in the dynamic balance of the different elements that participate in the ecosystem. For example, Jacobs observes that “‘sustainable’ commonly applies to the practice of drawing on renewable resources at a rate no speedier or greedier than the rate at which the resources can renew themselves’.⁶ Folch states that it is necessary to ‘produce only what is reasonably held to be needed and

⁴ See Bastardas-Boada, Albert, ‘Ecology and diversity: A comparative trip from Biology to Linguistics’, in: Boudreau, Annette et al. (eds.), *Colloque international sur l'Écologie des langues*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003, pp. 33-43; also: Bastardas i Boada, Albert, ‘La metàfora ecològica: possibilitats i límits per a l'aproximació sociolingüística’ (The ecological metaphor: Possibilities and limits for a sociolinguistic approach), in: Pradilla Cardona, Miquel-Àngel (ed.), *Calidoscopi lingüístic. Un debat entorn de les llengües de l'Estat*. Barcelona: Octaedro/EUB, 2004, pp. 13-24.

⁵ See Bastardas Boada, Albert, ‘Lingüística general: elementos para un paradigma integrador desde la perspectiva de complejidad’ (General linguistics: Elements for an integrative paradigm from the perspective of complexity), *LinRed* (on-line journal) http://www2.uah.es/linred/articulos_pdf/LR_articulo_111120032.pdf, 11-11-2003, pp. 1-23.

⁶ Jacobs, p. 67.

with the least number possible of distorting external factors.’ Thus, the aim is always to conserve/preserve the fundamental balance that makes possible the very maintenance of the ecosystem and of its components. If we now translate this to linguistic sustainability, we could clearly establish principles such as that of *using only the allochthonous languages for that which is reasonably necessary and with the least cost of functions (or with the least distortion of functions) for the autochthonous languages*. Then, *sustainable linguistic contact will be that which does not produce linguistic exposure or linguistic use in allochthonous language at a speed and/or pressure—to a degree—so high as to make impossible the stable continuity of the autochthonous languages of human groups*. We can, then, state that *the sustainable character of a massive bilingualisation comes from the comparison between the degree of valuation and functions of the language that is not originally that of the group (L2) and that of the language that is originally that of the group (L1)*. *If the first is lower, the contact massive and the bilingualisation are sustainable. If it is greater, the bilingualisation is not sustainable and the language original to the group will degrade and disappear in a few decades.*

Also applying the terminology of sustainability to the current crisis of many of the linguistic ecosystems of humanity, we may be able to begin to speak of assuring the *ecological [ecolinguistic] viability* of linguistic groups via a *socioenvironmental [sociolinguistic] management* that is made adequate to assure avoidance of an excessive disorganisation that could be lethal for many of the linguistic codes which the different human subgroups have built up throughout their existence. The first task is to avoid abuses against the systems. One should not exceed their ‘charge capacity’. Therefore, as there are toxic and nontoxic doses, we should attempt to see *what degrees of linguistic contact prove sustainable in each typology of the different ones that exist, what functions prove to be the fundamental ones to be reserved for the autochthonous linguistic codes, and how the changes introduced work in interaction with other changes that could be taken place at the same time in the situation*. This forces us to go into still greater depth than is possible at present in our knowledge of the ecodynamics of linguistic contacts.

Just as studies are carried out on environmental or ecological impact, we also should be able to be up to studying the *sociolinguistic impact* of economic, political, educative measures, of migrations, of technological innovations, etc. We need quickly to reach clear and functional models of sociolinguistic ecosystems, to know of the interactions of their different elements, of how to quantify them and, in so far as it is possible, to be able to make predictions on their evolution and hence be able to propose measures that are adequate from the perspective of a sustainable management of plurilingualism.

Being able to reach this state of practical awareness of public administrations regarding linguistic diversity implies even today a constant and conscientious task on the political and governmental domains. In many cases, these studies would lead us to having to recommend important alterations in the distribution of power in many states, until now little sensitive to their internal national and cultural diversity. This would be necessary in order to give to different historical linguistic groups an important degree of control over their own collective life, something at present unavailable. For example, the generalisation of the principle of what is now known as ‘political subsidiarity’—enabling decisions to be taken on the maximum number of topics in politically administrative instances close to the citizens—would undoubtedly benefit the possibility of such linguistic self-government. Applying another version of subsidiarity, in a linguistic sense, we could say, as I have already often done, that ‘everything that a local language can do need not be done by a more global language’, that is to say that, by default, the language of pre-eminent use should be that of the group, the weaker, except for those cases of external communications when the situation so requires.

3. The imbalance and maintenance of sociolinguistic ecosystems

Languages, as complex objects, will simultaneously live in the minds, in the social interaction, and in the general communication of a given community, which will make use of them for purposes of social relations, categorisation of reality and, when necessary, to identify themselves in relation to other humans speaking other languages. Historically,

if this ecosystem suffers no fundamental disturbances, it will tend to reproduce itself intergenerationally, even though with internal change, via self-co-construction of the codes by the new individuals. If, however, as we have already stated, the ecosystem registers a large and powerful enough entry of exogenous linguistic elements, then there could occur a reorganisation of competencies and norms of linguistic usage, and this could lead to important evolutionary repercussions.⁷ There have been basically two main causes of the historical disruption of linguistic ecosystems: politico-economic integrations and migratory irruptions.

Hence, when and why does a situation of bilingualism or polyglottism in a society evolve towards the abandonment of the weaker code by its speakers and when not? If we compare language shift cases with others of stable balance, such as for example the diglossia typical of German Switzerland we find, as I stated in 1997, that “very probably, in this stabilisation of the local varieties there must intervene the fact of ... the existence of a highly positive groupal image —Switzerland is not a poor country that is little developed economically— and the fact that the adoption of the general German standard is not in any way a foreign imposition or the fruit of a situation of political minoritisation but rather a decision of the language group itself—and, if they wish, a revocable one freely taken.” I continued, then, that “fundamentally, the reason for the relative stability of these cases of diglossic distribution must be sought in the politico-cognitive dimension: none of the cases habitually analysed are situations of political subordination like those of the minoritised European communities. The perception of dependence and, in consequence, of self-deprecation, taking a group or foreign cultural elements as a main referent of behaviour and of values, simply doesn’t need to take place. It seems clear, therefore, that it must not be the simple fact of bilingualisation and asymmetric distribution of functions which can lead to intergenerational language shift, but rather the

⁷ See Bastardas i Boada, Albert, *Ecologia de les llengües. Medi, contactes i dinàmica sociolingüística*. Barcelona: Proa, 1996.

politico-economic *context* in which this bilingualisation takes place and the *meanings and representations* that its protagonists associate with it”.⁸

Consequently, those who move more towards the abandonment of their own codes are those human groups that live in a subordinating context in which they have no political control of their collective life —and hence of their public linguistic functions—, that are little developed economically but integrated into supraeconomic and perhaps more advanced areas, that experience geographic and social mobility --even if this is internal as, for example, from rural areas to cities—, and that maintain a non-favourable self-image while on the other hand tending to follow the dominant group of reference, whose language they attempt to adopt and, when possible, use to speak to their children.

4. Types of contact and sustainable multilingualism

4.1 Vertical contact

What we now wish to posit is how to avoid situations whereby people who have been bilingualised or polyglottised have to abandon the fundamental uses of their group’s L1 in their daily life. That is, how to make it possible for these people to continue using their habitual code and using it for the maximum number of functions. Let us distinguish, in our analysis, between two large situation types, which, however, can also exist together: vertical contact and horizontal contact.⁹ What we should consider then is whether bilingualisation is the fruit of a territorial and group integration inside wider

⁸See Bastardas, Albert, «Contextos i representacions en els contactes lingüístics per decisió política: substitució *versus* diglòssia des de la perspectiva de la planetarització», *Diversité langues* (on-line), vol. II, 1997.

http://www.telug.quebec.ca/diverscite/SecArtic/Arts/97/0997ab0/esp/0997ab0e_ftxt.htm .

There is a French version in the same number of the electronic journal (http://www.telug.quebec.ca/diverscite/SecArtic/Arts/97/0997ab0/Fr/0997ab0f_ftxt.htm) and also in a paper edition, in: Bouchard, G., & Y. Lamonde (eds.), *La nation dans tous ses états*. Montréal/Paris: Harmattan, 1997, ('Substitution linguistique *versus* diglossie dans la perspective de la planétarisation', pp. 111-129).

⁹ See Barreto, Amílcar A., 'Nationalism and linguistic security in contemporary Puerto Rico', *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* XXII, 1-2, 1995, pp. 67-74.

political and socioeconomic structures, or whether the situation has basically come about because of face-to-face contact with other people with whom one coexists on a daily basis.

In the first type of situation, that of 'vertical contact', we are referring, as mentioned, to linguistic groups which, without having been displaced from their territory, habitually become bilingual due to the fact of being politically integrated into a higher structure which decides to adopt, in the simplest typologies, a language with an official character, one which is not that of the affected group. Since there are far fewer states that there are languages, this is a case that is far from infrequent. In extreme cases, the state, which often consciously desires to build a homogeneous 'nation', will tend to put into practice a policy in which exalt the values of the official language, presenting it as the guarantee of national unity and the symbol of the new nation one wants to build. Reciprocally, in many cases, the discourse will be one of disparagement or at least of public oblivion of the other languages existing in the perimeter of sovereignty. Moreover, if this political subordination occurs, as is often the case, in the framework of acute technoeconomical change, which often leads to the destruction of the culture's traditional economic organisation, then the new language will progressively be seen as the language of the new situation, in turn seen as 'modern and of material progress'. The new language will then need to be not only known well but even adopted if one wishes to become integrated in the new ruling class or, simply, to improve one's social status. If this process becomes generalised gradually among the population, there may follow cases of group self-abandonment of the original language and thus an initiation of the process of linguistic extinction.

In these situations, action should be fundamentally political to reorient the predominant discourses in the directions of self-esteem and, at the same time, if possible, to provide the peoples with a sufficient degree of political and economic selfhood in their collective life. This should permit sociolinguistic self-determination and provide the freedom necessary to distribute communicative functions between both languages. There are organisational principles and techniques, as we know, which can organise the

corresponding distributions of functions and linguistic rights¹⁰. Depending on the territorial distributions of the peoples in question and on their volume, we can guide ourselves by the by now classic criteria of ‘personality’ or ‘territoriality’, to which I would suggest adding those of ‘functionality’ and ‘subsidiarity’, for those cases in which the other two terms cannot be applied with their optimum force¹¹. If the political power involves itself in this in a sincere way and the group’s demographic volumes are not too low, they are cases that can be solved and lead to long continuity.

These cases, however, may present more sustainability difficulties if, in a comparative sense, their demolingistic volume are proportionally lower and, even more, if they are territorially dispersed. Here, the compaction of the collective plays an important role. If the members are few but compacted, if they live in a single territorial base that clearly enables them to have public use of their L1 and an easy and continual linguistic interaction, then sustainability will be higher. On the other hand, if the group has been progressively dispersed and has mixed with other groups, even if the state in question recognises their rights and has positive official ideologies, they won’t be able easily to use their code in daily communication, and that could play against its preservation. In such cases, the acting mechanisms in the mixture situation can gradually lead to disuse of the L1, in favour of the more general one employed in the community.

4.2 Horizontal contact

If we now move toward the type of contact we’ve called ‘horizontal’, that is, the type in which bilingualism is basically produced by direct relations and face-to-face exposure, the factors and the dynamics can be different and, it should be noted, a good deal more difficult to make it sustainable. As we know, even though linguistic diversity, in order to be generated, needed isolation and uncommunication between the different human groups, these have always tended to move from their territories, in search of survival,

¹⁰ See, for example, Bastardas, Albert, & Emili Boix (eds.), *¿Un estado, una lengua? La organización política de la diversidad lingüística*. Barcelona: Octaedro, 1994.

greater well-being, or even colonising adventures. This means, and we are at present living in a critical moment, that the encounter and the physical contact between different populations is an old phenomenon and at one and the same time extremely contemporary.

In this type of encounter, the demographic aspects will have a very decisive weight. The situation could evolve in a different way if the volumes are clearly unequal or even approximately the same. Certainly, other variables could here come also into play. For example, it won't be the same if the demographically smaller group is an economically— or culturally or technically—superior community, but everything indicates that the displacements in unequal volume will tend to evolve towards the loss of the smaller group. If the volumes are more equal, the perspectives for continuity are clearer since, if there are no other decisive asymmetries, the effectives can tend to remain very much the same because the statistical opportunities for mixed matrimony will be the same for both. Other factors, certainly, can contribute to causing the evolutionary balance to shift, such as the linguistic policies under which this encounter takes place and whom it tends, overall, to favour. In these situations, all the factors—economic, ideological, residential, media factors, etc—can become relevant, and in each case specific dynamics can be produced.

In general, in this kind of situations, governmental actions should aim at making people aware of the fact that, if it is a question of a host society that is linguistically normal and developed, the host country's language will be learned and that if they transmit their original L1 then their children will have greater linguistic competence that can benefit them in future. On the other hand, this could save the parents the inconvenience of seeing how their children are unable to speak their own original language, a situation probably both personally and collectively regrettable. Here also there would be room for action, especially in dignifying the original languages and informing the populations of the security of their effective bilingualisation at an early age.

¹¹ See Bastardas, *op. cit.*, 2002.

In all probability, then, to the extent that globalisation also increases personal interethnic contact, it could tend to increase the ‘ethnic conscience’ of human individuals or groups. The challenge is to organise and manage this. How are we to avoid conflicts, how inform the population of the fact that this can be happening? How are we to make known the need for transition phases in linguistic adaptation, etc? We have to find a way of establishing a set of negotiated principles of coexistence that save: 1) *the principle of linguistic stability and continuity of the receiver group*, 2) in consequence, *the principle of intergroupal and social adaptation of the immigrant group*, and, 3) *the principle of personal freedom of the displaced in regard to the continuity of their cultural elements, at the intragroupal level*. On this point, many questions remain open and much work remains to be done.

5. Conclusion

We must of course be realistic and thus start from the fact that there is still much terrain to be covered in the creation of a sustainable linguistic development. At the same time, we should also be aware that we are acting in a different and rather peculiar time in the human adventure, one that could create obstacles in the full attainment of the aims being proposed by those of us in favour of sustainability. Our times are characterised, as we’ve seen, by an exponential increase in contact among peoples and languages and, hence, by the end—or in all events the considerable reduction—of the traditional isolation that favoured linguistic differences within the same species.¹² On the other hand, now more than ever, awareness of linguistic diversity is advancing, and high levels of international and governmental organisations are operating in an ethics of protection and of solidarity in regard to politically subordinate linguistic and, above all, economically less developed

¹² See Bastardas-Boada, Albert, ‘[Biological and linguistic diversity: Transdisciplinary explorations for a socioecology of languages](http://www.teluq.quebec.ca/diverscite/SecArtic/Arts/2002/reflexions2002.htm)’, *Diversité langues*, (on-line), 2002, vol. VII, Analyses et réflexions (<http://www.teluq.quebec.ca/diverscite/SecArtic/Arts/2002/reflexions2002.htm>), and also on paper edition, in Catalan, ‘Diversitat lingüística i diversitat biològica. Algunes pistes transdisciplinàries per a una socioecologia de les llengües’, in: Bastardas, Albert (ed.), *Diversitats. Llengües, espècies i ecologies*. Barcelona: Empúries, 2004, pp. 13-53.

groups. The sustainability model thus offers itself as a horizon and a process on the path to improving the linguistic life of humans, through the development of interlinguistic equity and justice.

One special responsibility in this whole state of things falls on the international cultural institutions, which must effectively compromise themselves to adopt the sustainability philosophy and promote research on practical and valid organisational principles, for example, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or of the more specifically related 'Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights' created in Barcelona in 1996. Linguistic sustainability clearly seeks the concerted world action of all the peoples of the planet, which must agree and decide how they desire to organise themselves communicatively in this new century.

Let me finishing by simply enumerating five points, which seem to me crucial to recall and which can guide our actions and interventions in favour of linguistic sustainability.

We should, I think, act by:

1. Stopping the abusive uses of the large interlanguages and extending the ideology of linguistic equality and solidarity;
2. Dignify the self-image of subordinated, nonmajority language groups;
3. Allow these linguistic groups to be able to control their own communicative space, autonomously regulating their public linguistic uses;
4. Distribute communicative functions, providing exclusive and effective functions to the codes of linguistic groups currently in a situation of subordination; and,
5. Create awareness in governments, commercial firms, and societies in general, on the importance of attaining linguistic sustainability, urging them to habitually incorporate necessary studies on sociolinguistic impact in their decision-making processes.

The aims are important ones and the path may be long, but what is fundamental, as John Rawls told us, is to recall that "...the limits of the possible are not given by the actual, for

we can to a greater or lesser extent change political and social institutions and much else¹³.”

¹³ *The Law of Peoples*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.