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Minority language communities in the age of globalisation: Rethinking the organisation of human language diversity

1. Introduction

The increasing communication and interdependence of the planet's human groups in the contemporary era – which is anticipated to increase in the near future – has led to a considerably increased awareness of human cultural and linguistic diversity. Populations far from each other make contact for commercial, ecological and political reasons, and awareness of both differences and the need for intercomprehension is gathering strength in the minds of many people. Perhaps thanks to "globalisation", the world's population– although some parts of it more than others – is able to assume represent itself on a planetary scale for the first time and realise the common destiny of the human beings travelling through astral space on this immense ship named Earth.

Having overcome traditional geopolitical barriers, we peoples of this planet now find ourselves in very fortuitous circumstances for trying to come together and organise cohabitation based on common values and the building of relationships that are equitable and constructive in all senses. In linguistic terms, this new situation calls into question the ideological preconceptions that have thus far sustained mankind's

communication. The importance of some dominant historical elites' forms of speech in the last two hundred years has been based on ideas of hierarchy and politically and/or economically subordinate groups. In many cases, the States have been inherited by demopolitically dominant groups, that have used them to implant organisations of linguistic communication based not on equality and fraternity between different groups, but on the imposition of the dominant group's language as the only one for official and public communications. This has often been accompanied by a derogatory tone towards the other languages of the groups present in the territory of the State where it exercises sovereignty.

A fresh evaluation of the diversity of the verbal communication systems that human groups have created throughout their history seems to be gathering strength. A new perspective based on the recognition of all forms of expression as humanity's irrevocable cultural heritage has been adopted by some international organisations. This is an enormous encouragement for us to look at the phenomenon with universal eyes and thus leave the narrower perspective of local conflicts behind, where those with the loudest voices can make their visions and ideas of the situation prevail, while population groups with less power become ideologically subordinate. The opportunity to rethink our traditional ideas and to propose new foundations for the linguistic organisation of humanity as a whole is more present than ever and must be taken advantage of.

2. The problems of the situation

2.1   What are the problems of linguistic diversity? What is it that has led to current interest in this phenomenon? It is probably two interrelated facts mentioned in the previous section. On the one hand, there is the exponential growth in linguistic contact on a global scale, either as a result of politics, economics or technology and the media, or the displacement of population groups from one cultural area to a different one. On the other, there is an awareness of the fact that many forms of speech in the most widespread areas of the planet are disappearing. On one hand, therefore, there is the need to communicate beyond one's traditional cultural group – caused by various factors – and on the other, the perverse effects of this modification of cultural ecosystems, i.e. the abandonment of one's own linguistic patterns even for purposes of intra-group communication.

The main concern, therefore, focuses on this extremely important trend towards the reduction of the planet's linguistic diversity. Given the probably irreversible nature of the contact phenomena taking place, new questions arise. *How should linguistic contact be manages? Is it always necessary for contact to lead to one or more of the languages concerned becoming extinct? How can the proliferation of linguistic substitution phenomena be avoided?*

This type of question leads us towards the need to deepen our knowledge of substitution processes in the linguistic field in order to be able to see clearly how they can be avoided and/or reversed. It must be remembered that what will probably be impossible is a return to previous situations in the socio-cultural habitats that have encouraged the diversity that now exists for so long. It will probably therefore be necessary for us to leave simplistic solutions based avoiding or reversing substitution by eliminating contact to one side. We should instead try to conceive of how it will be possible to maintain global linguistic diversity in situations typified by differing levels of contact, but which are sure to be permanent and continuous, from the point of view of ecological complexity. This would seem to be borne out by factors such as the great difference between the number of states and the number of languages, implying the co-existence of different linguistic groups within common political structures. A frequent consequence of this will be the command of several languages of most groups, because of their official status or due to the advantages that may be obtained in economic or knowledge terms – or because of the mixture of population groups that were previously separated in different territories. The main question is therefore *how to maintain linguistic diversity within the framework of individuals and societies becoming more generally multilingual.*

2.2   Starting to answer this question means realising the uselessness of a reductionist and partial focus that concentrates only on strictly linguistic factors. The substitution processes, and therefore those of maintenance, do not have their basic causes in the linguistic level itself, but instead, as is well known, in the wider socio-cultural context of which it forms a part. That is to say that so far, languages have remained in use not because they are particularly special but rather because the political, demographic and economic conditions of its speakers have facilitated the process. Now that these factors

have been totally or partially modified, a new ecosystem capable of ensuring the viability of maintenance of the communicative languages in a different context must be reconstructed. There will therefore be no return to the past, but rather a return to the future. It will be necessary to design new global models of linguistic co-existence and new concepts that enable us to formulate the minimum requirements for maintenance in a new situation characterised by interdependence on other groups and new general socio-communicative needs as a consequence.

However, within this overall planetary vision, there are different types of contact situations, which need to be clearly differentiated in order to adapt them to the possible solutions. These situations range from contact of the language of an important group (i.e. an economically developed group with a strong demography and full political sovereignty) with English as the current techno-scientific and economic interlanguage – with much less worrying consequences in terms of maintenance of diversity – to the contact of the language of an economically and politically diminished group with few people in constant contact with the language of the dominant group in all key aspects. It is clear that the problem of diversity worsens as this continuum of situations leads us to the lower extreme, i.e. to cases of maximum political, economic, demographic, educational, media and even ideological subordination. When all is said and done, therefore, the continuity of linguistic diversity is connected to relative asymmetries of power between the groups in contact. When placed in a situation of dependency by the political or economic changes to their previous social structures, many groups not only accept having to become bilingual. As well as taking on the language or languages of the dominant group or groups, they may also – in the interests of their children, for example – decide to discontinue the generational transmission of their own language. This leads to the definitive disappearance of many linguistic communication systems. It is clear, therefore, that without an ostensible modification of these conditions of extreme subordination and the substitutionary ideology accompanying it, it will be very difficult for humanity as a whole to keep the historical languages of many of the present linguistic groups.

2.3   Action for maintaining linguistic diversity therefore becomes from this point of view a clearly political initiative. It is on this collective level that societies can influence a rethinking of the current situations, while trying to modify the various factors causing

of the current negative dynamics. It seems, therefore, that an internationally co-ordinated initiative is necessary to encourage awareness of the crisis of linguistic diversity and undertake initiatives so that the current poor conditions can be changed at all government levels, from the mankind's common organisations to more local political institutions.

One of the most urgent aspects for work and clarification is to find out clearly *which policies should be applied in the different situations around the world*. Despite the fact that the phenomenon of linguistic contact is universal, not all cases are identical and nor are all applicable policies the same. The situations and development of contact processes also vary.

As an example, and on a provisional basis, it would at least be necessary to distinguish between these different situations (while combining variables such as the group's demographic volume, its level of political subordination, its level of economic development, its everyday contact with other groups, and the representations of the situation):

A. Demographically small, politically subordinate, economically underdeveloped groups, with negative self-representation that also socially mixed with one or more other groups greater in numbers and/or relative power.

B. Small politically subordinate groups but not at all or hardly mixed in their normal social territory.

C. Small groups, not at all or hardly mixed, with a degree of political autonomy and official and public recognition of their language.

D. Small/medium-sized groups with a degree of political autonomy and official and public recognition of their language but with intense everyday social cohabitation with one or more other officially recognised groups.

E. Politically independent medium-sized groups.

F. Semi-large politically independent groups.

G. Politically independent large groups, on a continental or supra-continental scale.

(Combining the variables, even more groups can be obtained, and we can therefore extend the categories).

These situations, known as "structural", can also be found in different states of evolution, with different levels of language users and/or fluency within the group itself, and therefore different standings with regard to the value and use of the language. Given

the dynamic nature of these situations, different political initiatives are necessary depending on the situation in which each group finds itself, especially in those cases where linguistic substitution is clearly taking place. Action in a case where only a quarter of the population use their own language will not therefore be the same as in a situation where three quarters maintain everyday use of the language. Neither will trying to modify the linguistic behaviour of a group with a positive image of its language be the same – at least initially – as in another group where the majority of speakers have negative connotations of their own language.

The practical theorising ideal concerning the problem of diversity would be to have already reached agreement on the most effective action to be taken in each situation. In order to move on from the phase of discussion and theorising over the values of diversity towards practice, we must be able to decide clearly upon *which policies for which situations in which stages of evolution and in which historical contexts*. We can therefore try to establish this according to the variables and categories mentioned above or by suggesting others.

3.   Action by organisations on an international scale

It is of greatest importance that international bodies and/or platforms – the Umited Nations, UNESCO, etc. - should be aware of current problems of linguistic diversity, and especially the impact that their decisions may have on political power at continental and state level. In fact, without a clear worldwide policy which includes the acceptance and spreading of appropriate ideological frameworks as well as providing the necessary economic aid, it will be very difficult as things stand for the governments of many countries where the linguistic crisis is occurring to feel the need to take action. Their elites are educated according to European-based ideological frameworks, and tend to apply frameworks to their countries that have been shown to be historically erroneous and that are currently being rethought in Europe itself. However, these countries lack sufficient resources to carry out their own policies of asymmetrical bilingualism in a European language. This causes not only a galloping linguistic substitution among the elites themselves in favour of the foreign language – often that of the ex-colonial power – but also leads to a large majority of the population who never learn the official language well not participating democratically and becoming defencelessness in juridical terms. Within this framework, it is not at all strange that parents that are able to decide to stop speaking their own language in order to communicate with their children

in the country's official language. Thus instead of promoting the codification of autochthonous languages, literacy programmes for their populations and the use of these languages by civil servants and State bodies - leaving individuals' bi- or multilingualism for later stages – the governing classes look to the obsolete nation-state. They do so while ensuring that the control of this State remains in the hands of the governing classes, as insufficient knowledge of the official language will prevent most of the population from having access to the most important administrative and government positions. The mechanism is therefore perverse and may clearly lead to a negative image of one's own language and an exaggerated evaluation of the official one. The reverse, a policy of multilingualism, would allow the participation of different linguistic groups in democratic life, and give their own languages dignity and usefulness, leading to their consequent maintenance, without prejudice to the population's bilingualism or multilingualism in the international languages that may be necessary. However, the above ideological standpoint is now prevalent in most African states and the Pacific territories, and despite some significant differences, also in certain areas in South America (and until very recently, in the North as well).

One possible initiative at a worldwide level would be to establish a specific body that would be responsible for debate, guidance and subsequently, decision-making, concerning mankind's linguistic organisation. Left as it is now to the simple market forces, supra-national linguistic organisation tends to lead to the predominance of one – or territorially of some – languages with ever decreasing opportunities for regulation and action by States' or sub-States' governments. Without a body that considers how we should organise ourselves linguistically in the name of mankind as a whole any initiative in this transnational sphere will be very difficult, and will clearly prejudice not only the less subordinate smaller groups but also the medium-sized ones. A clear subject for debate is therefore how to start to articulate this institution. Perhaps the work done as a result of the Barcelona Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights could be used, and this body could be formally constituted through UNESCO.

4.   The European situation

Despite the fact that the budgets for linguistic diversity that have prevailed in Europe for the last two decades are being revised, the truth is that there are still a large number

of unresolved situations and significant resistance by governments to openly and happily recognising the continent's historical linguistic diversity. Despite positive discourse on diversity in some States – Switzerland being the prime example - in other countries (e.g. France) there is a very strong and enormously deep-rooted ideological resistance in the minds of the population, which has generally been taught that the official language - the symbol of the State – has a hierarchical value and that different linguistic groups are to be disrespected and ridiculed. In the last two hundred years, therefore, there has been a notable series of linguistic substitution processes in Europe, some of which have not entirely finished. The languages of the elites who established the European states have been depicted by the media as the only legitimate and necessary languages. Together with the general changes accompanying modernisation – urbanisation, industrialisation, linguistic area migrations, socio-economic mobility, etc. – this has led to today's map of minority linguistic groups in Europe. Our contradictory continent – the champion of human rights and at the same time the producer of the most terrible and inhuman hate – still has to solve the problem of its linguistic diversity. It is, I believe, totally unacceptable and incomprehensible in an age where democratic values and respect for others and their differences predominates, that the situation of negative policies can still arise – rather than positive ones, which are what is needed – concerning the subordinate linguistic groups of its citizens. The resistance that is still found in France, Great Britain and Spain – to give just a few examples – to changing legislation and/or applying the reforms that are adopted still exemplify the ideological opposition to linguistic diversity in the minds of a substantial part of the European population.

In this context, the common European institutions have an important role to play. Their authority and their voice can do a great deal to spread the values of acceptance and dignity of historical linguistic diversity, and to help states adopt policies that are favourable to the linguistic diversity of their historic minority groups, which with the demopolitically dominant group or groups make up a common State on equal terms. It is precisely these majority groups in the States that are now responsible for changing their historic decisions and providing fraternal shelter for demographically smaller linguistic groups, while promoting their recover and development.

The European continent may perhaps be a better example than any other of the current problem of linguistic diversity according to the different situations. On the one hand, the

European bodies must make their positive opinions and evaluations regarding diversity count. This is especially true of those regarding smaller territorial groups in a worse overall situation. On the other, they have to face the linguistic organisation of the common European bodies themselves, with intercommunication between citizens and social bodies of a future Europe that is more united and integrated. Finally, there are the situations that are created and will be created by extra-European (and even intra-European) migrations. There are therefore three main subjects affecting linguistic diversity: *the maintenance and normalisation of subordinate linguistic groups, intercommunication in Europe*, both between citizens and institutions, and *population movements*.

Each of these subjects requires specific responses that we must produce between all of us. As smaller linguistic groups can be helped within the general European framework, the questions of *what the best policies on a European scale to guarantee the inter-relation of organisations and citizens while maintaining diversity are, and what principles action on the linguistic consequences of migratory movements should be based on* should be answered with urgently, but with care.

5.   At State level

Despite the certain importance in the future of world and continental plans for linguistic diversity, it is still at State level where this evolution has most effect. Depending on whether the State's linguistic organisation of the linguistic groups that it includes, the progress of their linguistic behaviour will have been different. Without succumbing to the error of attributing States' behaviour as the unique factor in the situations of socio-linguistic deficit to be found in Europe and the world today, one must agree that despite the multiplicity of factors in this evolution (e.g. economic, technological, demographic, and ideological), negative and positive initiatives by the State have been determinant in the evolution of the majority of cases. It is clear, therefore, that the positions taken by the bodies making up the State with the regard to the use of different languages will be of primary importance in the continuity or disappearance of linguistic diversity.

Long-standing principles such as "territoriality" or "personality" as the basis for the organisation of multilingualism of population groups within the same state exist, but there is a need to expand and update them. This idea would appear to be supported by cases where the application of these traditional principles does not satisfactorily resolve the problems of the situation. For example, in the current cases in Spain, the principle of

territoriality in the Swiss style is not applicable, and neither does the principle of personality seem to resolve the power asymmetries thrown up by the languages in contact. I wonder, therefore, whether it may not be necessary to introduce a third principle, that of "functionality", based on the opportunity of a non-hierarchical distribution of functions within a bilingual or multilingual population, as is the case in Luxembourg. It would seem that in the future, with globalisation, it will fall to us to use not only our local language but also the continental and global ones – if they are not the same. In the case of Catalan, for example, it would appear difficult – as things stand – for a complete range of functions to be obtained for Catalan, i.e. living only in Catalan. Spanish, it seems – and more so taking its transcontinental demolinguistic volume into consideration – will continue to play an important and prestigious role in Catalonia, because of commercial communication with the rest of Spain, the far greater media range than that generally found in Catalan, and the central and European governments. English will become the language of supra-continental relationships, and also, but not entirely, of European ones. Placed, therefore in a situation where there will be languages that will have exclusive functions that Catalan or other minor group languages will be unable to fulfil, it would seem that suggesting some sort of compensatory balance in their favour is justified, providing them where possible with functions that they would monopolise in their linguistic areas. If the non-completeness of functions is taken for granted – at least partially – for languages belonging to many groups in a more interdependent world of the future, it is therefore necessary to move on to a survival strategy based on "positive diglossia" and not a strictly hierarchical one, i.e. on a suitable distribution of the functionality of the competing languages. *However, what form should this distribution of functions take? Which ones should be reserved for the languages of the groups in a most difficult situation? Which objective principles are the most suitable for carrying out this distribution? Can we create a principle based on the European "subsidiarity" criteria, whereby everything that can be done by one's own language must not be done other more widespread ones?*

In the near future, one of the major questions to be asked will be how to stop the abuse of languages that are in general use. Once the population has become polyglot, the temptation for large linguistic groups to carry out most functions and to make it difficult to use smaller or medium-sized groups – which can be seen now – will grow and increase rapidly. It is here that the role of the States – and as mentioned above,

international organisations – becomes crucial. The States will not be able to abandon their small groups and instead of having a relationship based on ignorance or hostility, that must have one based on solidarity and help, acting, if necessary, legislatively or economically in their favour. A *new ethic of cultural and linguistic solidarity* must be adopted by the democratic authorities of contemporary States.

This *new ethic* must be based on an ecological vision of socio-linguistic situations in the sense not only of looking from the official and regulatory perspective, but also on the situation's determining factors as a whole and its evolution. A compensatory and balancing initiative favourable to the proportionally weaker linguistic groups is thus created. It should therefore be a search for *equity* rather than *equality*, so that a socio-cultural ecosystem can be ensured which favours the stability of linguistic diversity. Thus, next to the traditional conceptualisation in terms of "rights" it will be necessary to introduce the idea of *compensatory functions*, which is much more extensive and more suitable for trying to solve the problems resulting from linguistic contact.

6.   Some specific questions to begin debate and reflection

As well as the questions and statements that have been mentioned above – the most important of which I have italicised – I have listed others below, in a systematic and ordered way, that could be a subject for more profound discussion in this or other symposiums:

A. How must linguistic groups be organised so that while general intercommunication is ensured, each group may maintain the maximum degree of communicative functions for its historic language? What general ethical and practical principles must govern this linguistic organisation of humanity as a species?

B. Is it necessary to establish a language of general intercommunication or more than one? Why? Which language (or languages) should it be? Is it necessary to accept the "spontaneous" evolution of the current situation towards English or should we promote a worldwide debate on the subject and a conscious decision by the organisations representing mankind on this question?

C. How should we avoid the situation where once one or more interlanguages are established as for use in general communication, these also end up also fulfilling the more basic functions of human groups' own languages, which may lead to a generalised process of linguistic diversity substitution?

D. How should situations of "positive diglossia" or non-hierarchical distribution of functions be regulated? What criteria or principles should they be based on? How can we use the principle of "subsidiarity" in this situation?

E. Which cases are moving towards substitution and which ones not? Why? What contextual conditions would be necessary in order to make it possible to provide stability based on non-hierarchical distribution of functions?

F. What is the minimum ethically acceptable organisation that States with different linguistic groups must use? Which ones at common state level? Which ones in their respective territories? How must these general situations be adapted to 1) more than two or three languages in the same State's territory? 2) the non-homogenous nature of the population in the different historic territories if not "mix and match" 3) different demographic volumes between the different groups?

G. Which policies would in general be the most suitable in situations of massive contact between populations living in the same territory?

H. How should situations be organised where an autochthonous group socially cohabits with a sub-group if a demolinguistically and politically larger group with a dominant language at international level in the same territory? How should a compensatory and balancing ecological perspective be applied in these cases from the point of view of equity rather than strictly equality?

I. How should the educational systems of groups be organised in order to provide everyone with the linguistic abilities necessary for the new continental and planetary era, while ensuring the pre-eminence in customary social use of autochthonous languages and their intergenerational continuance at the same time?

J. What type of worldwide organisation should be created to consider the problem of diversity and human linguistic communication and propose suitable organisational patterns? Who should promote the creation of this institution? What role should be played by the existing bodies and movements?

7.   Some principles for global linguistic peace

Finally, to stimulate discussion, I have made a note of some of the outlines of principles for linguistic organisation that have been published in French and Catalan but perhaps have not been very widespread in anglophone areas.

First. The ideologies and conceptual landscapes with which we have to think about the problem must take into account the socio-linguistic experience to date in order to avoid a planet with linguistic organisation based on a hierarchical and asymmetrical structure between the interlanguage and the other languages. Co-existence on equal terms must be based on an appropriate distribution of functions, based on the principle of "subsidiarity", which would establish the rule that it is not necessary to do anything in the interlanguage that can be done in local languages. The idea is to provide sufficient protection for autochthonous ecosystems.

Second. One of the norms to be applied from the beginning must be that having sufficient competence in the interlanguage does not remove either the right or the need of linguistic communities to use their own languages fully and to the maximum. The indiscriminate application of the "principle of competence" would always be in favour of the language that is more generally shared - the interlanguage – and could deprive the other languages of functions, while endangering their existence and as a consequence provoking unnecessary conflicts that are difficult to resolve.

Third. Given that people may represent reality while arriving at conclusions that do not directly depend on it, but rather on narrative and interpretative configurations that they have created, global organisations must spread an ideology that is clearly favourable to equality between linguistic communities as well as promoting the practical instructions necessary for organising linguistic communication. At the same time, they must encourage the self-esteem of less favoured groups and counteract popular ideas that are as widespread as linguistic superiority on one side, or linguistic inferiority on the other.

Fourth. Preferential treatment must be given to methodologies providing communicative competence in the interlanguage. This is in order to ensure a sufficient and optimal level for the different generations that have to acquire it, and to avoid undesirable results, such as parents preferring to use the interlanguage as their children's L1 rather than their society's autochthonous language. Obviously, this development of practical knowledge of the interlanguage will not be detrimental to the corresponding development of local languages.

Fifth. Special attention must also be paid to the articulation of cases in which a determined linguistic group has frequent social contact with a considerable number of individuals that have the interlanguage as their L1. The tendency will probably be for the interlanguage to be established as the one of normal use, with potential repercussions on intergenerational reproduction of the other language if the populations integrate socially. In these cases, the mechanism of mixed marriage may act blindly, while reducing the generational transmission of local languages if the population is not made aware and if linguistic diversity is not promoted at the heart of the family unit itself by means of the opportunity of the "one parent one language" principle where necessary.

8.   Conclusion.

The phenomenon of linguistic diversity is highly complex. It is therefore all of us who are responsible for theorising, making it comprehensible, and above all, proposing initiatives and policies suitable for the near future. It is very probable that there are aspects that have not been dealt with in this text or that have only been dealt with in passing. It is now necessary, therefore, that in the discussion and throughout our symposium, we expand upon them, question them, and imagine them in other ways.