

## English as Global Language: Problems, Dangers, Opportunities

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To say that globalization is on all our minds would be both trite and excessive. Yet for many years we have known that we live in the 'global village' and, as humanists, we have even rejoiced in the fact that the various technologies facilitating communications and travel have woven our world into one, concretely and visibly. We know that the Other is not out or down there but right here; that the suffering of the Other, for example that of the Third World, is with us constantly in images and statistics. In many ways this has been the fulfilment of many dreams: Christian, humanist, cosmopolitan dreams in which humanity is indeed one.

A decade ago I gave, in Japan, a paper entitled 'Literature in the global village' in which I evoked this dream come true and confessed to its naïveté and its dangers: the universal, the universals, and the universalizing to which it leads can so easily be distorted by and through their human origins, always steeped in relativity. Our attention was being forcibly drawn to the fact that the modern Cartesian subject was irretrievably western, white, male and probably tainted by capitalism. In literary and cultural studies we had been hard at work repairing the dream by emphasizing and empowering cultural identities, by glorifying difference. In literary studies this had demanded a constant questioning of the manner in which we construct history, formulate theory, attribute values, in an effort to avoid imposing false universals on literary phenomena from diverse cultures; in an effort, in other words, to enable the universal to be more and more truly universal, by making more faithfully evident the particular it harbours. Clearly, citizenship in the global village did not guarantee a sufficiently sensitive and comprehensive framework for thought, despite the continued attractiveness of the ideal of universality.

Similar questions arose (and still arise) when it came to reflecting whether – or how or to what extent – languages express aspects of our common humanity or perhaps of the obverse, our infinite differences. The initial answer is, of course, that

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both are the case. Let us invoke as an example the distinction linguists make between idiolect and sociolect as variations of the same natural language, one being the adaptation of it by an individual or a minority, the other the more generally accepted pattern. Languages are in a constant state of flux; they are objects of dominance, of subjection, of appropriation. Just listen to any publicity, to any propaganda, to any professional jargon. Yet language has also been viewed, notably because of its relationship to thought, as a powerful element of unification. In the Pan-Slavic movements that criss-crossed the Austro-Hungarian empire each language was the cement that held together a culture. In today's Zimbabwe there are 14 official languages requiring codification, cross-translation, interpretation for the most ordinary circumstances of life as well as for solving legal and political problems. The list is infinite. And just examine your own mind: you will see to what extent your self coincides with your language; if you are bilingual or multilingual the question soon arises which of your languages, your mother tongue or your most familiar foreign language, expresses you best. There is no better example of the complex relationship between the universal and the particular, since despite or in addition to that intimate link to the individual person, language is also the most collective of possessions.

To make that commonality more real, to make it as universal as possible, has often been an idealistic dream. Just think of Esperanto, a failure that taught us so much about the difficulty of artificially creating linguistic unity. Yet an example of created linguistic unity does exist: it is modern Hebrew . . . . But a new phenomenon has overtaken the linguistic scene; it is the gradual appearance of an overwhelmingly powerful common language throughout a surprisingly large proportion of our world. It is, of course, the English language.

I need not nor would I be able to cover all the aspects of this phenomenon which is everywhere so evident. A few examples will suffice. In many countries of the world the school curriculum now emphasizes English as the foreign language instead of what used to be the preferred foreign language. In my home country, former Czechoslovakia, in addition to the home language which is Czech, before the Second World War the preferred foreign language used to be German; after the Second World War it was Russian; then, even before the end of Communism, in the late 1980s German came back, despite much psychological resistance, because there were trade relations with East Germany. But already English was gaining ground; and now English is definitely the preferred foreign language. In countries as varied as Brazil, Russia, and many countries of Eastern Europe such as Romania, and these are just examples, French was the foreign language of the educated classes, the Alliance française was an important centre of cultural and social life in many a city, and above all, French had been for centuries the language of diplomacy. This is simply no longer so. A young Canadian of Iranian origin, whom I entrusted with a little research project on our topic, reports that in her grandmother's circles in Iran French *did* play the role I have been describing, but no longer does.

In large states such as India, where English has served as internal *lingua franca* for historical reasons, English as language of communication is co-present with Hindi, as it is co-present in Africa with Swahili. But of course there are many forces other than the internal need for communication within states which have brought to the

fore English as world language; these are both economic and technical, as well as scientific. And it would be unrealistic not to say in this connection that the United States has become its driving force. Business people all over the world, including Japan and China, are training in English *en masse*.

At this point I should restate our problem because I may have given the impression that this relatively new wave of predominance of English strikes me as some kind of undue or unexpected invasion, whereas in every place and circumstance, whether diplomatic, scientific, commercial or technical, it has specific reasons to occur, and has not occurred without much reflection on the part of educators and decision-makers.

There is definitely a positive side to the phenomenon: let us remember the humanistic dream I mentioned at the beginning, that of a common language which would unify mankind, and which could have been an artificial language, or a natural language other than English. Why not English if all the historical forces I have mentioned, and then some, offer it to us as language of communication? Sometimes history brings with it the fulfilment of improvements that had previously seemed unthinkable. For example, in the United States during the Second World War, black as well as white men were drafted, and together were silently integrated into the armed forces; this did more or at least as much for racial equality than some of the more vocal integration movements. Similarly, could it be said that in some ways the globalization of English offers an opportunity for many people in many places to communicate when previously it was not the case, and is this a modest step towards a better world? As teachers of languages and literatures we ought to examine that hypothesis, as indeed it has been examined at many levels in other countries and contexts. Here we should mention, as one of our responsibilities, quality of the teaching of English as foreign language; in this area we should feel as responsible for maintaining high-level criteria as we do in the teaching of all languages. Yet this is not easy to attain with respect to the world of business, where the need is massive and where the temptation exists to train many people quickly in a minimalist way.

For this reason among others, the purists in matters of language instruction may not necessarily consider the spread of English as global language to be the 21st century's answer to the curse of the Tower of Babel. Applied linguists, language teachers, psychologists know well the enormous variations in individual talents for languages that one encounters in a given population. We have that problem in Canada, where bilingualism is an official policy. When it comes to language training in either direction, disparities in talent are enormous.

Aviation is a significant example of the world role of English, whether in traffic control, in the technology, in the management of airports and customer relations. More often than not, aboard aircraft, all announcements are repeated in English.

Another aspect to consider is the quasi-universal acceptance of English as the language of science – again a new and rapid phenomenon (not so long ago, German was a dominant language in chemistry . . .). But now, I would not be surprised if in Portugal, as elsewhere, it was not emphasized to young scientific researchers that in order to succeed in science you must publish in English-language journals, the only ones that guarantee the circulation of your results throughout the world. In Canada

again, where the province of Québec has its own research council and means of funding research and research communication, there is certainly a body of opinion to the effect that French-speaking researchers could and should be encouraged to publish in their own language, and funds *are* expended to develop scientific journals in French. Ideally it should be possible to work in both directions by means of translation, but there one soon encounters a funding problem.

In my view there is no simple answer to the question whether or not the dominance of English in science is a benefit to mankind, or a cultural levelling from which there is no return. It is undoubtedly up to the individual scientist to cultivate both his or her talent in scientific communication in English, as well as his or her own national or regional culture and language. A complex and demanding ideal no doubt, but one which is being practised by many researchers. So, in this domain at least, we do not have a tower of Babel situation, nor the paradise of a single universally accepted language, but we do have a *modus vivendi* which works.

As the world becomes more and more one world – and the forces which make it so are sometimes desirable, such as the coming together of Europe; and sometimes undesirable, such as the threat of terrorism – the importance has come to the fore of preserving linguistic diversity. In a federated regime there is no need for linguistic levelling, on the contrary: Switzerland is a good example of the viability of languages in a federal situation. The cost of preserving language rights, never to be underestimated, should always be factored in, and this may become, or has become, one of the grounds where humanists can responsibly intervene by defending the expenditures connected with linguistic justice. I am told for example that in the Council of Europe language policy has recently been rediscussed. From the languages of all member states there had been translation into French and German as well as English; then there was an attempt, for economic reasons, to translate into English only; but after protests by the French and German ministers translation into all three languages has reportedly been resumed.

The European Science Foundation uses two official languages, English and French; but it would appear that English increasingly predominates over French. Once again, economy of money and time is the reason, and once again those responsible must discriminate between mere national susceptibilities and any real linguistic injustices.

In using sophisticated international organizations as my examples I am only scratching the surface of the real underlying human problem, which is the very survival of linguistic diversity and integrity worldwide, and this primordial means preservation of endangered languages, which is one of the many missions of Unesco. Thomas Homer-Dixon, a Canadian scholar from the University of Toronto who has become an authority in the area of conflict resolution, has recently devoted an article to this problem entitled 'We need a forest of tongues' (published in *The Globe and Mail*, 7 July 2001), in which he argues that we need linguistic diversity as desperately as we need biodiversity. He begins by countering Ken Wiwa, the son of the Nigerian writer Saro-Wiwa who was executed some time ago by the ruling regime. The son absolutely shares his late father's humanistic convictions. Therefore it is not without reference to such humanistic convictions that he wrote 'we should not worry too much about the loss of the world's linguistic diversity'. He cited a new

study by the Worldwatch Institute according to which half the world's languages may soon disappear; especially vulnerable are those indigenous tongues spoken by only a few thousand people. Because of the close relationship between language and culture the Worldwatch Institute was sounding the alarm: losing languages would mean losing cultures. With this Ken Wiwa disagreed, saying that the effort to preserve dying languages is futile, that the world is changing too fast and that you cannot freeze them in time. Just look, by way of contrast, at the adaptability of English! Homer-Dixon agrees with Wiwa that one should not try to artificially preserve languages which cannot adapt to changes in life; but he thinks that the death of languages should not just become a *fait accompli*, that the process should be slowed down. 'Why be concerned about loss of this diversity? Maybe it doesn't matter much to the rest of the world if one language and its culture are lost, or two languages, or even a dozen. But if we lose half the languages on the planet – even if most of them are only small, marginal languages, spoken by people in faraway places – we will compromise the health of human society generally.'

Homer-Dixon shows how, for the sake of efficiency, mankind has tended to homogenize agriculture. Today we are 'homogenizing our ecosystems on a planetary scale, turning forests and prairies into monocrops of trees and grain, paving across wetlands for subdivisions and malls, and replacing our depleted fisheries with aquaculture pens'.

It is not just by way of metaphor that Homer-Dixon compares this homogenization of agriculture with what is happening in the field of languages. 'Linguistic and cultural differences are barriers to trade and profit; global capitalism needs a simpler, more transparent and more manageable environment for its business'. Understandably, people everywhere want to share the advantages of the global economic system. 'So, from the top down and the bottom up, people are working to dismantle the barriers between them. Two of the main tools for this dismantling process are English and the Western culture English carries with it'.

In other words, according to Homer-Dixon, it is people themselves who are carrying out homogenization of ecosystems as well as linguistic systems. In so doing they unleash forces which become more and more difficult to control and which result in cultural impoverishment, just as agricultural homogenization results in agricultural impoverishment.

Homer-Dixon does not necessarily appear concerned with the survival of particular languages; it is their number and diversity that he defends. As humanists we should remain even more attentive to the deep relationship between language, culture and just plainly social life; and we should explore helpful modes of interaction, rather than let, by default, the English language become (or even convey the impression that it has become) a means of political domination.

English-speaking countries have been well aware of their responsibility in this regard. Let us consider, for example, the efforts made in the United States to give equal linguistic opportunity to minorities. Many millions of US citizens have non-English-language backgrounds, and vast programs exist to meet their needs. 'The cost of curriculum development, preparation of materials, and teacher training for so many different languages is enormous. To help meet the need, the federal government has developed a comprehensive support system of materials development, dis-

semination and training centres around the country, with a National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education in Arlington, Virginia . . . . It seems likely that support for bilingual education will remain a priority for the federal government' (Tucker and Gray 1980: 8).

This statement was written over 20 years ago. In order to continue, very informally, to test this professed willingness of English-speaking countries to accommodate other languages I asked a research assistant to help me conduct a rapid inquiry among children and grandchildren of immigrants of her acquaintance living in Toronto. Pegah Aarabi writes: 'Personally, the only link I have with my culture is my language. I have been in North America since I was four years old, but through the persistence of my father who insisted on speaking only Persian at home, I was able to fluently retain my Farsi language . . . . Having grown older I now realize the importance of knowing my language, because there is so very little else I have from my culture. Basically, my culture is Canadian, because I have been here for so long; however, by keeping my [mother] language, I have been able to hold on to another culture that will forever be part of me. I find that most of my friends are learning languages other than their mother tongue in order to learn about other cultures. On the other hand, one has to learn whatever language dominates in one's country in order to be able to keep up with everyone else. My grandmother learned French in Iran back in the 1950s as the diplomatic language, but now it is English . . . . In my experience, the value of foreign languages lies in preserving diversity . . . . My best friend, a second generation Canadian, wants to learn Hebrew in order to be able to visit and possibly live in Israel for a period of time and to learn more about her culture. Therefore she also equates culture with language, as I do, and she sees the value of other languages . . . . Some of my friends who were born in Canada but are of Chinese origin have managed to keep their language and speak Cantonese fluently; to them it is a way of preserving their culture; and that is the attitude of all the people I have interviewed . . . . One must first and foremost know the language of the country in which one lives. English, in Canada, is not repressive; it is necessary to one's success. Older generations of immigrants have exceptional knowledge of their home language but do not learn the language of their new country, and that is limiting. The preservation of one's original culture through one's original language is secondary to learning the language widely spoken in one's present country.'

I have quoted Pegah Aarabi at length because she seems to me to express a creative attitude towards the dominance of English in English Canada (she does not touch on the case of French, the other national language): namely, that while there are vast territories where English has to be the language of communication, it is nevertheless possible to conduct one's cultural life in other idioms.

Thus while the omnipresence of English is far from having heralded the advent of a more fraternal world, it does not necessarily carry with it western cultural and political dominance, although the danger exists that it can do so, or be perceived to do so. Our academic disciplines should therefore remain committed to the stimulation of linguistic and cultural integrity. That includes, among other things, quality control of the teaching of English as foreign language. It also implies constant attention to linguistic curriculums at all levels of education everywhere, in defense of the

right of human beings to express themselves and to communicate in all possible freedom.

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### **References**

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