

English in the Global Ecology of Languages: The Value of Multilingualism

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From the *Kyiv Post*, 21 November 2002:

“President Leonid Kuchma’s decision to send the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages to parliament for ratification has reignited public debate over use of Russian and other languages. Ukraine signed the charter during May 1996 and parliament ratified the document in 1999, however the nation’s Constitutional Court overturned parliament’s action....The charter provides for the *wider use of minority languages* in education, the courts, culture, the media and government.... Refat Chubarov, a lawmaker and one of two Crimean Tartars in parliament, said the bickering about the status of the *Russian language has overshadowed the charter’s importance to other ethnic minorities*.... Lyubov Blot, the editor of *Slovo Prosvity*, a Ukrainian-language newspaper, said that it was *Ukrainian, rather than Russian, that is threatened*.... The Razumkov Center for Political and Economic Studies’ Serhy Shenghin.... said that *Ukrainian should remain the state language, and Russian should be considered the language of international communication*.” (“*Language charter causes stir*,” by Evgenia Mussuri, *emphases* added.)



The reader may well ask: What does all this have to do with teaching English? What bearing does the relative status of Ukrainian, Russian, and the minority languages in Ukraine have on English teaching there? In what follows, I hope to show that English language teaching and Ukraine’s proposed multilingual language policy have everything to do with each other, just as the teaching of English is intimately connected to multilingualism worldwide.

In a world in which English, as the language of business and technology, increasingly takes on the role of global language, it is simultaneously true that local, indigenous and immigrant minority languages are asserting themselves and gaining recognition on a new and larger scale. Although English offers the promise of economic access and social mobility, in reality that promise is fulfilled for only a small percentage of the population in most nations of the world. Alternatively, the promotion of local and minority languages offers doors of opportunity and means of cultural expression and enrichment for vast numbers of marginalized speakers, a trend which can become a momentous force (Hornberger 1996).

Both of these trends, the centripetal, globalising tendency associated with English and the centrifugal, fragmenting tendency associated with local and minority languages and

identities, exert pressure on the one language-one nation ideology of language policy and national identity, which has held sway in recent Western history from the rise of the European and American nation-states in the 18th and 19th centuries on through the formation of independent African and Asian nation-states in mid-20th century and up to the present. Sociolinguist Joshua Fishman wrote of the several score new members brought into the family of nations in the mid-20th century

and of the nationistic and nationalistic ideologies underlying their choice of a national language: “nationism – as distinguished from nationalism – is primarily concerned not with ethnic authenticity but with operational efficiency” (Fishman 1969: 113). In either case, emphasis was on choosing a national language, one national language, whether it were a Language of Wider Communication serving nationistic goals or an indigenous language serving nationalistic ones.

Yet the one language-one nation equation is increasingly recognized as an ideological red herring (Woolard & Schieffelin 1994: 60-61). For one thing, it is a relatively recent phenomenon when seen against the backdrop of human history. Ancient empires such as the Greek, Roman, Aztec, Inca, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman “were quite happy ... to leave unmolested the plethora of cultures and languages subsumed within them – as long as taxes were paid” (May 2001: 6). Furthermore, in our day, twin pressures of globalisation and ethnic fragmentation exert pressures on the one language-one nation ideology, from without and within.

State-imposed national languages are undergoing pressure, not only from the worldwide push for English from above, but also from the rise of local languages from below. As the one language-one nation ideology of language policy and national identity breaks apart, multilingual language policies which recognize ethnic and linguistic pluralism as resources for nation-building are increasingly in evidence, on every continent of our globe. Such policies seek to transform former homogenizing and assimilationist policy discourses into discourses about diversity, pluralism, and emancipation.

Many of these multilingual policies envision implementation through bilingual intercultural education, embodying an assimilationist-pluralist paradox wherein a traditionally standardizing education is increasingly called on to make room for and promote diversity. The assimilationist-pluralist ideological paradox is reflected in educational practice as well, enacted in programmatic,

curricular, and interactional choices educators make. Case studies from Botswana, Burundi, Hong Kong, and Malta show how in post-colonial nations, the paradox between assimilation and pluralism is revealed in classroom teaching/learning situations where the “tension between valuing an indigenous language ... and valuing the language of a former or current colonial power” is played out through codeswitching and code choice practices (Martin-Jones & Heller 1996: 10).

The ecology of language offers a metaphor for exploring the ideologies underlying multilingual language policies, and the continua of biliteracy framework offers an ecological heuristic for situating the challenges faced in implementing them. Specifically, this metaphor and heuristic suggest the importance of filling as many ecological spaces as possible, both ideological and implementational, with multilingual language policies and practices, as a means of balancing the globalising and fragmenting tendencies in today’s world and thereby creating a more just and equitable future for all.

In what follows, I introduce the ecology of language and the continua of biliteracy and discuss them in relation to the cases of my own United States and of the opening illustration from my colleague and newsletter editor Oleg Tarnopolsky’s Ukraine, as examples of the value of the ecology of language paradigm for future (business) English language teaching.

Ecology of Language

Einar Haugen, generally credited for introducing the ecology of language, defines it as “the study of interactions between any given language and its environment,” going on to define the environment of the language as including both psychological (“its interaction with other languages in the minds of bi- and multilingual speakers”) and sociological (“its interaction with the society in which it functions as a medium of communication”) aspects (Haugen 1972: 325). He emphasizes the reciprocity between language and environment, noting that what is needed is not only a description of the social and psychological situation of each language, but also the effect of this situation on the language (Haugen 1972: 334).

Three themes of the ecology metaphor are useful in understanding today’s multilingual, globalising yet ever richly local, world, all of them present in Haugen’s original formulation and in subsequent writings by others. These are: that languages, like living species, evolve, grow, change, live, and die in relation to other languages and also in relation to their environment; I call these the *language evolution* and *language environment* themes. A third theme is the notion that some languages, like some species and environments, may be endangered and that the ecology movement is about not only studying and describing those potential losses, but also counteracting them; this I call the *language endangerment* theme.

The language endangerment theme has particular relevance for those of us involved in English language teaching around the world. Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas contrast two language policy options with regard to English worldwide: the diffusion of English paradigm characterized by a “monolingual view of modernization and internationalization” and the ecology-of-language paradigm which involves “building on linguistic diversity worldwide, promoting multilingualism and foreign language learning, and granting linguistic human rights to speakers of all languages” (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 1996: 429). The juxtaposition of the linguistic imperialism of English over against multilingualism and linguistic human rights is clearly founded on a concern for the ongoing endangerment of many languages, displaced by one or a select few, and the need to counteract that endangerment and displacement. Pakir (1991) uses the term “killer languages” in reference to the displacing effect of imperial English as well as other globalising languages such as Mandarin, Spanish, French, and Indonesian.

The lesson to be learned here, from taking an ecological perspective on Global English, is that the teaching of English does not occur in a vacuum with respect to other languages in the immediate environment, but rather has direct impact on those languages and must be undertaken within a framework that allows both ideological and implementational space for the teaching of the other languages in the ecology.

Continua of biliteracy: Opening up ideological and implementational space

The *continua of biliteracy* is a comprehensive, ecological model I have proposed as a way to situate research, teaching, and language planning in multilingual settings. The continua of biliteracy model defines *biliteracy* as “any and all instances in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in or around writing” (Hornberger 1990: 213) and describes it in terms of four nested sets of intersecting continua characterizing the contexts, media, content, and development of biliteracy (Hornberger 1989; Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester 2000). Specifically, it depicts the development of biliteracy along intersecting first language - second language, receptive-productive, and oral-written language skills continua; through the medium of two (or more) languages and literacies whose linguistic structures vary from similar to dissimilar, whose scripts range from convergent to divergent, and to which the developing biliterate individual’s exposure varies from simultaneous to successive; in contexts that encompass micro to macro levels and are characterized by varying mixes along the monolingual-bilingual and oral-literate continua; and with content that ranges from majority to minority perspectives and experiences, literary to vernacular styles and genres, and decontextualized to contextualized language texts (see figure –reprinted from Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester 2000 by permission of Multilingual Matters Publishers, Clevedon, UK).

The notion of continuum conveys that all points on a particular continuum are interrelated, and the model suggests that the more their learning contexts and contexts of use allow learners and users to draw from across the whole of each and every continuum, the greater are the chances for their full biliterate development and expression (Hornberger 1989: 289). Implicit in that suggestion is a recognition that there has usually *not* been attention to all points. In educational policy and practice regarding biliteracy, there tends to be an implicit privileging of one end of the continua over the other such that one end of each continuum is associated with more power than the other, for example written development over oral development (the figure below depicts the traditional power weighting assigned to the different continua). There is a need to contest the traditional power weighting of the continua by paying attention to and granting agency and voice to actors and practices at what have traditionally been the less powerful ends of the continua (Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester 2000). For those of us teaching business English, for example, this might include providing space not only for our students to exercise their oral, receptive, first language skills even while learning English as a second language (development continua) or the opportunity for them to write vernacular style texts on local issues and identities as well as formal, decontextualized business texts (content continua), but also, for example, the welcoming of nonstandard or non-native English speaking teachers alongside native English speaking ones in our classrooms (media continua; cf. Tarnopolsky 2000).

Power relations in the continua of biliteracy

traditionally less powerful <---> traditionally more powerful

Contexts of biliteracy

micro <---> macro

oral <---> literate

bi(multi)lingual <---> monolingual

Development of biliteracy

reception <---> production

oral <---> written

L1 <---> L2

Content of biliteracy

minority <---> majority

vernacular <---> literary

contextualized <---> decontextualized

Media of biliteracy

simultaneous exposure <---> successive exposure

dissimilar structures <---> similar structures

divergent scripts <---> convergent scripts

Both the continua of biliteracy model and the ecology of language metaphor are premised on a view of multilingualism as a resource. Ruiz, like Fishman (1966) before him, drew our attention to the potential of a

language-as-resource ideology as an alternative to the dominant language-as-problem and language-as-right ideological orientations in language planning (Ruiz 1984). Further, as the above overview reveals, the continua of biliteracy model also incorporates the language evolution, language environment, and language endangerment themes of the ecology of language metaphor. The very notion of bi (or multi)-literacy assumes that one language and literacy is developing in relation to one or more other languages and literacies (*language evolution*); the model situates biliteracy development (whether in the individual, classroom, community, or society) in relation to the contexts, media, and content in and through which it develops (i.e. *language environment*); and it provides a heuristic for addressing the unequal balance of power across languages and literacies (i.e. for both studying and counteracting language endangerment).

For those of us teaching English as a second or foreign language, the continua model serves as a reminder, then, that both our learners and their languages need ideological and implementational spaces in which to flourish, lest the local and global language ecology drive their “other” language(s) into endangered status and thereby leave speakers bereft of not only their means of expression but also their best means of access to bi(multi)literacy in English.

Global English and Multilingualism in the United States

My sense of urgency about providing ideological and implementational spaces for the whole ecology of languages is perhaps heightened because of recent accumulating events in my own country, where multilingual language policy spaces seem to be closing up at an accelerating rate and the one language-one nation ideology still holds tremendous sway. Analyzing the politics of official English in the 104th Congress of the United States, Joseph Lo Bianco writes of a U.S. discourse which he designates *unum* and which is all about opposing multilingual excess and national disunity, i.e. about homogenization and assimilationism. Also present, he found, was a discourse of *pluribus*, about diversity and emancipation, i.e. about language pluralism (Lo Bianco 2001; cf. Cobarrubias 1983:63). Both discourses have arguably always been present in the United States, waxing and waning with the times, an ideological tension captured succinctly in the U.S. motto, *E pluribus unum* ‘out of many one’ from which Lo Bianco takes his designations.

Though the United States traditionally has no national language policy, U.S. language ideologies are evident in both national educational policy and state level language policies. In the latter half of the twentieth century, there have been ecological policy spaces for multilingualism and the discourse of *pluribus* in, for example, the national Bilingual Education Act of more than 30 years standing, and in state language policies such as Hawaii’s recognition of Hawaiian and English or New Mexico’s of Spanish and English. Since 1980, however, when Hayakawa first

introduced a proposed English Language Constitutional Amendment in Congress, the discourse of *unum* has been gaining ground as a growing number of states have passed English-only legislation.

Even more recently, the pace has picked up. At the state level, under the infamous Unz initiative, California and Arizona voters passed anti-bilingual education referenda in 1999 and 2000 respectively. In these states, multilingual language policies were thereby reversed (or severely curtailed) for ideological reasons before implementation could be fully realized, documented, and tested. In the debates surrounding passage of Proposition 227 in California, it became clear that (1) the public had very little understanding of what bilingual education really is; and (2) much of what passed for bilingual education in California was in fact not. The ideological discourse of *unum* prevailed over that of *pluribus*, with very little attention to the facts of institutional implementation. At the national level, under the Bush administration, the No Child Left Behind Education Act has essentially gutted the Bilingual Education Act and its potential to provide multilingual education for thousands of children who speak English as a second language (<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/jwcrawford/>). Instead, emphasis is on “moving them to English fluency” in a minimal number of years, with little to no recognition of the value of biliteracy in that task, much less the value of multilingualism itself as a resource. None of these trends bodes well for the pluralistic discourse of *pluribus* or a multilingual language ecology in the United States.

Happily, however, there is also a move afoot in recent years among U.S. linguists and language educators to help solidify, support, and promote longstanding grassroots minority language maintenance and revitalization efforts in the United States, under the rubric of “heritage languages.” The Heritage Language Initiative, which has among its priorities “to help the U.S. education system recognize and develop the heritage language resources of the country” and “to increase dialogue and promote collaboration among a broad range of stakeholders” (<http://www.cal.org/heritage/>), has thus far sponsored two national research conferences in 1999 and 2002 (see Wiley & Valdés 2000). In the intervening years, a working group of scholars was convened to draft a statement of research priorities now being circulated to researchers and policy-makers (available in Wiley & Valdés 2000 and at www.cal.org/heritage/); and a bi-national conversation on heritage/community languages between US and Australian scholars took place in Melbourne (Hornberger, forthcoming).

This Heritage Language Initiative, supported by both the Center for Applied Linguistics and the National Foreign Language Center, is at least in part about resolving the longstanding language policy paradox whereby we squander our ethnic language resources while lamenting our lack of foreign language resources. It further seeks to draw together and provide visibility and support for the myriad and ongoing bottom-up efforts at rescuing and

developing U.S. indigenous and immigrant language resources.

The Heritage/Community Language effort is one which, I believe, takes an ecological, resource view of local, indigenous and immigrant minority languages as well as national and foreign languages as living and evolving in relation to each other and to their environment and as requiring support lest any one of them become further endangered. Similarly, the Ukrainian move to ratify the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages represents acknowledgement of a language ecology that encompasses not only international languages such as English and Russian and the national language Ukrainian, but also ethnic languages such as Crimean Tartar, Hungarian, or Hebrew, as individual and national resources. It is my firm belief that we, as linguists and language educators, and especially as English language teachers, must work hard to fill as many ecological spaces as possible, both ideological and implementational, with multilingual efforts like these if we are to keep the multilingual language policy option alive, thus balancing the globalising and fragmenting tendencies in today’s world and thereby creating a more just and equitable future for all.

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