

# Language Policy and Globalization

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*In many areas of Miami, Spanish has become the predominate language, replacing English in everyday life. Anyone from Latin America could feel at home on the streets, without having to pronounce a single word in English.* (Salomon, 31 May 2008, p. A5)

*'No habla ingles? You're fired!' . . . Should we require new Americans to speak English with English-speaking Americans? The answer, of course, is yes.*" (Young, 20 July 2008, p. 2)

*A fifty-six-year-old Turkish woman was refused a heart transplant by clinics in Hanover on the grounds that her lack of German (common among Gastarbeiter) made the recovery process dangerous. The clinic defended the decision: the patient might not understand the doctors' orders, might take the wrong medicine and might not be able to get help if there were complications.*" (reported in Spolsky, 2004, p. 1)

This paper is a brief treatment of some problems deriving from language policy and language planning in the context of globalization. The paper considers: (1) the distribution of languages and second languages, (2) an overview of several major geographical areas of language conflict, and (3) some suggestions for how language policy issues might be resolved.

There are three basic philosophies on language policy that tend to dominate the discussion (Schmidt, 2000). First is the philosophy of *assimilation*. Most of the history of the U.S. has been oriented toward assimilation in that people came as immigrants with their native language, but they quickly learned English and integrated into the culture where the spoken language was English, even if they kept some of the customs from their nations of origin. The assimilation approach is the dominant philosophy or language policy in both the U.S. and Germany today as expressed in the second and third examples that began this paper.

Second is the policy of *pluralism* or *bilingualism*. Canada, specifically Quebec, is an example of the pluralist position in that both English and French are official language and all official communication is in both languages, and both languages are taught in the schools (Ricento & Burnaby, 1998). If Puerto Rico were to become a state, the U.S., to some slight degree, would resemble linguistic pluralism since Spanish is the primary language of Puerto Rico, but English is widely spoken and taught (Schmidt, 2000, pp. 213-214). Another possible example in the U.S. are the geographical areas controlled by Native Americans (unfortunately called "reservations" throughout most of our history). In 1990 and 1992 the U.S. Congress passed legislation that gave power to tribal leaders to enact language policy that could make the native language the dominant language, but to date there has been little action beyond a standard bilingual policy (Schmidt, 2000, pp. 211-212).

Third is the philosophy of *confederation*. Clearly the best example of this policy is Switzerland where there are rather clear geographic regions. Lugano is Italian, Lausanne and Geneva are French, and Zurich is German. I recall some friends from many years ago who worked for Swiss Aluminum in Jackson, Tennessee. They had a daughter who was just learning to speak. On certain days of the week they spoke French, on others German, and on others English, or if there were guests in the home who spoke a specific language, that became the language of the day. There was one evening when we were dinner guests along with a couple who were primarily German-speakers. It was, however, a "French speaking day" so the child was mildly confused about what language to use. Her solution was perfect—she responded, politely, "Merci, Danke, thank you." It was then agreed that the language of the evening would be English since that was the only language in which all the guests were conversationally fluent.

In reality, of course, there seldom is a clear border between the three philosophies, and perhaps with the exception of the assimilation position, each

of the examples given above could be argued or conceptualized as a combination of pluralism and confederation.

### Language Distribution and Use: Geographic and Virtual<sup>1</sup>

The ten languages spoken by the largest numbers of native speakers are, in order from most often spoken to least often spoken:

Language	Speakers (approximate)	Official (approximate)
<b>Chinese</b>	875 million	3 nations
<b>Hindi</b>	370 million	2 nations
<b>Spanish</b>	350 million	23 nations
<b>English</b>	340 million	67 nations
<b>Arabic</b>	206 million	28 nations
<b>Portuguese</b>	203 million	9 nations
<b>Bengali</b>	196 million	2 nations
<b>Russian</b>	145 million	6 nations
<b>Japanese</b>	126 million	2 nations
<b>German</b>	101 million	7 nations

Other European languages in the top 30 are French (67 million in 38 nations) and Italian (61 million in 4 nations).

When considering other aspects of world languages, English is unique in several categories. English is the language most spoken by *non-native speakers* (approximately 350 million). English also is the language with the most words, due primarily to its ability to both adopt words from other languages, and to add newly forged words, mainly in the area of technology. English also is the most published language and the most often studied second language.

Within the context of the European Union and the broader context of globalization, a major factor in the role of English as a “universal language” or *lingua franca* is the omnipresence of media-based popular culture.<sup>2</sup> A study by Margie Berns and colleagues representing several European nations (Berns, de Brot & Hasebrink, 2007) studied the presence and role of English in Europe. They began their report:

In contemporary Europe, issues of language have taken on new urgency and importance. Two developments have contributed to current debates and discussions on linguistic matters. One is globalization of the world’s economy and the accompanying increase in the spread of English. The other is the institutionalization of the 25-member European Union (EU); with its increasing multilingualism and multiculturalism as more countries gain entry over the coming years. (p. 1)

At the end of their study, they conclude:

At the very beginning of this study, the main hypothesis was that the English language seems to be “omnipresent” in the lives of young Europeans. This means that young people do not encounter this language in language classes at school only, but have plenty of opportunities where they can have contact with English. The results of our study clearly emphasize this basic notion. Beyond school, there are at least three important factors contributing to the presence of English: the media, personal networks, and intercultural communication as it is exercised during vacations and travels abroad. (p. 112)

The results of this study ring true for me based on taking students from Virginia Tech on study abroad trips to Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic. The Virginia Tech students, none fluent in the languages of the nations they visited, have found a situation where they could not find students from that nation with whom to carry on a conversation. One observation in particular stands out. In Croatia, it was something of a surprise to find that even young children seemed able and wanting to carry on conversation in fairly colloquial U.S. English. As we visited the new private media companies and Internet services, the reason began to be clear. Most of the television they watched was either U.S. or UK produced with the spoken language in English and the subtitles in Croatian. Thus, they continually heard spoken English in conjunction with their native language. On the Internet much of the content they

accessed was in English, and finally, they listened to music primarily from the U.S. and UK.

Today, of course, the most significant factor in language globalization is the Internet. According to World Internet Statistics (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>) the latest estimates (2008) of the percentage of people using major language groups online, based on native speakers of the language are English with approximately 450 million users, followed by Chinese with approximately 320 million, and Spanish with approximately 129 million. The remaining languages in the top ten, in descending order, are Japanese (94 million), French (73 million), Portuguese (73 million), German (65 million), Arabic (41 million), Russian (38 million), and Korean (37 million). All the remaining languages account for approximately 250 million Internet users.

### **Language Conflicts: Local and Global**

Even a cursory examination of language-based disputes around the globe makes it clear that there is a problem that is intensified by globalization. Coulmas (2005) breaks the nature of such conflicts down into two primary categories. Micro choices concern structural features of a language, such as the movement in Chinese toward a more phonetically based orthography. Macro choices concern larger issues such as status planning and language policy; issues of protection of minority languages and the promotion of specific languages for education, business, and international relations.

Belgium is an example of a nation divided by language (Miller, 19 July 2008). In Belgium there is a fairly clear geographic division between the Dutch-speaking north and the French-speaking south. Brussels, of course, is an exception since it is geographically a part of the north, but linguistically more closely aligned with the south.

After the June 2007 elections, Belgium was without a government for nine months because the political parties from the two major language groups, Flemish and French, could not agree on issues of representation. Prime Minister Yves Leterme offered his resignation, but King Albert refused to accept it and appointed three men from outside the political fray to come up with a compromise that would be acceptable to both the French-speaking Wallonian minority (40%) and the Dutch-speaking majority (60%).

The battle is not over—even the description of the new government appointed by King Albert on

December 30, 2009 must be described in terms of whether the newly appointed officials are Flemish-speaking or French-speaking (Belgium has new government, 7 January 2009). Els Witte, a Belgian historian is quoted as saying “A language is a culture. In Belgium the two cultures know very little about each other because they speak different languages. There are singers known in one part, not in the other. Television is different, newspapers, books” (quoted in Kimmelman, 4 August 2008).

Several of the former Soviet republics are in the middle of language-based policy disputes. In Estonia (Alas, 2007) the problem is between the majority Estonian speakers and the minority Russian speakers (25%). During the half-century of Soviet occupation, hundreds of thousands of Russians relocated to Estonia to work in factories. After gaining its independence, Estonia offered citizenship, but on the condition that Russian speakers pass a language and culture test. Only 40% have taken the test; 20% cling to their Russian citizenship though living in Estonia; and 40% remain stateless. Estonian government data shows that 52% of Russian-identifying speakers are fluent in Estonian.

In 2006 Amnesty International called for Russian to be given recognition as an official minority language, but few primary and secondary schools offer instruction in Russian, and no college or university offers a program in Russian. A Council of Europe memorandum (July 2007) recommended that Estonia drop the citizenship language and culture test for older applicants. It further said, “A common language for all the citizens could co-exist with the perpetuation of regional or minority languages.”

Uzbekistan, after gaining independence, replaced Russian as the official language in 1995 with Uzbek (Kozlova, 2008). Even with such changes, Alisher Ikhamov, a research fellow at the University of London’s Center for Contemporary Central Asia and the Caucasus, said that 70% of Uzbeks speak Russian fluently and Russian-language magazines and television still dominate the foreign media.

Kyrgyzstan has experienced significant departures by ethnic Russians following its independence (Toursunof, 2008). One result is that many young Kyrgyz had no significant exposure to Russian and therefore are shut out of universities that continue to use Russian rather than the Kyrgyz language because Russian is more adept at dealing with abstract or technical concepts. After dropping Russian as an official language following

independence, in 2003 Kyrgyzstan restored Russian as an official language, and most news and information is in Russian.

In other parts of the globe the problems may be different, but the conflict is similar. In East Timor the struggle between the colonial language, Portuguese, and the native Tetum language is the battleground (Taylor-Leech, 2008). Indonesian and English also are making significant inroads because of increased technology. The current approach to language planning is to encourage multilingualism, recognizing that within the nation there are multiple identities.

Africa, admittedly a vast area, is a chaotic brew of tribal languages, colonial languages, and the introduction of languages from migrations (Arabic) and technology (English, Russian and Chinese) with the accompanying tensions over language planning and policy (Djité, 2008). There has been no consistency in the process of change. Ghana reverted in 2001 to an English-only policy beginning with the first year of primary school. The Democratic Republic of Congo in 2003 moved from four official languages to only one, French. In Burundi, French no longer has official status, being replaced by Kirundi. At the same time, the Burundi government in 2006 instituted the introduction of English as a subject beginning in primary schools.

Other cases that could be discussed include, but are not limited to, Creole language in Jamaica (Brown-Blake, 2008), multiple marginal languages in the Philippines (Tupas, 2008), justice-based language issues over Quichua in Ecuador (Berk-Seligson, 2008), multilingual and minority languages in Luxembourg (Homer & Weber, 2008), multiple languages in Malaysia (Gill, 2007), language change and inclusion in Chinese education (Trent, 2008), and issues of public signage in Belarus (Brown, 2007). On an even broader scale, are language planning and policies that cover larger geographic regions that are increasingly more compact and in closer communication due to new technology such as Asia (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007) and Europe (Phillipson, 2004; Uysal, Plakans & Dembovskaya, 2007). Now, however, we turn to the United States and the European Union.

### **United States and European Union**

Europe, of course, has always been a multiplicity of nations and national languages, and it was several of the European languages that were

carried by colonial hegemony around the globe, most notably English, French and Portuguese.

In some respects, the U.S. has been a multilingual society since its founding because throughout its history each new wave of explorers and immigrants brought with them their native language. The German heritage, for example, was strong in Pennsylvania and as the immigrants moved westward to Missouri and Nebraska, they took their language with them. My own religious denomination, the United Church of Christ, is a good example of this. A fellow church member, Allen Kroehler, who is a retired professor from Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, grew up in a German-speaking church in the U.S. Midwest that continued to use German until there were so few of the younger members who did not use German in everyday conversation that they did not understand the content of the worship liturgy and sermon. Through a number of unions, the United Church of Christ was formed in 1957 from two dominant factions—the New England Congregational churches that were English-speaking, and the German Evangelical Reformed churches that tended to be German-speaking. Another retired professor of engineering, Jim Wiggert, tells stories of growing up in a German-speaking Lutheran congregation where his father was pastor. Like Kroehler, Wiggert understood almost none of the language used in worship, and even after most people in the congregation spoke English, there was a German service for the few who preferred German to English in their religious worship.

In the U.S. when you call a government agency, local or federal, or your local pharmacy, or the cable company, you are immediately asked whether you want to use English or Spanish—press “1” for English, or “2” for Spanish.

Language policy in the U.S. has focused primarily on one of two issues: (1) justice and equality, or (2) national unity for the common good (Schmidt, 2000). The arguments around justice and equality have focused largely on minority group rights. There have been many variations on how this has taken shape.

There was a period of time, mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, when states with large Spanish-speaking populations required the public schools to provide bilingual education during the first years of primary school. After the first few years, bilingual education was not provided since it was assumed all the students spoke and read English. The effects of this were evident. After the death of my father-in-law

who lived in Texas, there was a yard sale to dispose of some of the belongings. There were several instances where children acted as interpreters for their non-English speaking parents or grandparents. If you wanted a job as a cashier in the local grocery in small farming towns, you had to be bilingual because many of the customers did not speak English.

The second issues, national unity for the common good, is inseparable from issues of national identity—are you “American” or not? Historically, the U.S. welcomed immigrants from many nations, but they were expected to learn English upon arrival if they did not already speak it. Most immigrant groups did this, but not all. Based on conversations with many Asian students, they were encouraged to learn and use English, even if their parents and grandparents spoke the native language at home. Some of them could carry on a basic conversation in their family language, but it was not the language with which they were most comfortable. The result was that within one generation English was the only language used in conversation.

Language policy, of course, is a contentious issue in the European Union. How do you form a union with so many unique and established nations, cultures, and languages? In some ways, admittedly a far stretch in thinking, the formation of the EU approximates over the course of several decades what the U.S. did over the course of several hundred years. Even today in the major cities, and even in smaller cities such as Roanoke, Virginia, you have significant immigrant populations and the need for education in English within a bilingual setting. The nations of the EU have experienced and are experiencing similar immigrations—the Turkish workers to Germany, North Africans to France, and Bulgarians and Romanians to Italy are but a few examples.

### How do you say “junk food” around the globe?

The first response to this simple question might be “McDonald’s.” The implications, however, go far beyond commercial globalization. Robert Phillipson (2003), a professor of English at Copenhagen Business School, tells the following story:

There is a story of the newly appointed female minister in the Danish government who had to go to Brussels and chair a meeting soon after she took up office. She started the meeting by apologizing, in English, for not being fully in command of things because she was just at the beginning of her period. She evidently did not

know that for most speakers of English this would mean she was menstruating (p. 140).

Globalization is no longer theory—it is reality in both the lived and the virtual lives of a majority of the people who inhabit this little blue marble in the middle of a vast universe. Language and language planning is one of the major issues in the process that must be overcome.

In a discussion of the use of technology to translate language, Barbara Wallraff (2000) observed:

... the globalization of English does not mean that if we who speak only English just sit back and wait, we’ll soon be able to exchange ideas with anyone who has anything to say. We can’t count on having much more around the world than a very basic ability to communicate. Outside certain professional fields, if English-speaking Americans hope to exchange ideas with people in a nuanced way, we may be well advised to do as people everywhere are doing: become bilingual. (n.p.)

And so we close with some translations from Yahoo’s Babel Fish translation program:<sup>3</sup>

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a problem of major proportions!

Damen und Herren, haben wir ein Problem Hauptanteilen!

Mesdames et messieurs, nous avons un problème des proportions importantes !

Κυρίες και κύριοι, έχουμε ένα πρόβλημα σημαντικών αναλογιών!

Дамы и господа, мы имеем проблему главных пропорций!

أب عباد ذات مشكلة لدي نا ، وال سادة ال سد يدات أيها  
!خطيرة

女士們，先生們，我們有一個問題，主要比例

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In any discussion involving global statistics, the exact numbers are only approximations and change very quickly. The data in this section is taken primarily from Vistawide World Languages & Cultures (available from <http://www.vistawide.com/languages/>) and Internet World Stats (available from <http://www.internetworldstats.com>).

<sup>2</sup> There has been considerable debate about what to call a “universal” or “global” language. *Lingua franca* is the most common term, but others include *lingua orbis terrarum* [language of the world] or *omnimodus lingua* [universal language]. Some might find it humorous to use a term from a “dead” language to discuss the constantly evolving role of languages in the contemporary environment of globalization.

<sup>3</sup> Except for the English, each of these was “created” by the online translation program provided by Yahoo! Babel Fish at <http://babelfish.yahoo.com/>. The author takes no responsibility for the accuracy of any of the translations.

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