LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PLURAL SOCIETIES: AN AGENDA FOR DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT

The intention is to define principles which will provide a focus for the discussion of language teaching in plural societies. The principles are concerned with policy decisions and with ways in which policy decisions can be translated into classroom practice in schools. The perspective is English, but the assumptions are pluralist.

RESUMEN

La intención es la de precisar una serie de principios que sirvan de centro de atención para la discusión de la didáctica de las lenguas en las sociedades plurales. Estos principios tienen que ver con decisiones de naturaleza política y con la manera en que estas decisiones políticas pueden llegar a concretarse en acciones de índole práctica para las aulas escolares. Si bien se ha tomado como perspectiva el contexto del inglés, los presupuestos que cabe derivar de este trabajo son igualmente válidos para otras lenguas.

RÉSUMÉ

L'intention est de préciser les principes qui vont fournir une mise au point d'une discussion sur l'enseignement des langues dans des sociétés pluralistes. Les principes traitent des décisions d'ordre politique et des moyens de réaliser ces décisions dans une pédagogie pratique. La perspective est anglaise, mais les présupposés sont pluralistes.

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What follows is an attempt to set an agenda for discussion of language and language teaching in culturally and linguistically plural societies. The issues are seen as being important and of general relevance first because few, if any, nation states contain within their boundaries only one single language community and most contain many separable languages and dialects. They are secondly important because of the consequences for language teaching and learning of moves towards greater integration within the European Community, and thirdly because the world as a whole most obviously constitutes a multilingual society. In form the agenda consists of a set of propositions, but it is intended that they should function as questions, as issues for discussion. The perspective is not even British, but narrowly English: the language used is English, and that is an unhappy paradox in a paper which seeks to challenge some of the assumptions of linguistic imperialism, assumptions which have been harmful, and harmful not least to those English-speakers who have been encouraged to remain confined in their monolingualism.

The starting-point is that we are living in a world which can survive only if there is a recognition of the interdependence of individuals, of groups and of nations. It is in that context that the Tower of Babel is a potent image. The diversity of languages in the world marks the differences between people, and the fragmentation, the suspicion and the hostility which can arise when communication breaks down. Steiner (1975, p. 56) wrote:

> "Time and again linguistic differences and the profoundly exasperating inability of human beings to understand each other have bred hatred and reciprocal contempt. To the baffled ear, the incomprehensible parley of neighbouring peoples is gibberish or suspected insult".

Conversely, however, it is only through language that it is possible to negotiate the understanding which makes for a sense of community between people and between peoples. Clearly it is true that the ability to communicate offered by a shared language is not a *sufficient* condition for a sense of community; it does not guarantee that the mutual understanding that results will be used for the right purposes. However, it is suggested that a shared language is a *necessary* condition in the sense that without a shared language there can be no communication, and without communication there can be no community. That, then, is the starting-point. The propositions that follow attempt to outline some implications for teachers at the level of policy and at the level of classroom practice.

1. **The first proposition** is that *language expresses our individual identity; our language defines who we are; there is a sense in which our language is us.*

It would, perhaps, be more precise to say that the various kinds of language used by each of us represent the various facets of our identity. It is through language that we organise and make sense of our experience of the world: the world outside and the world within us, the world of possibilities and impossibilities, our experience of ourselves and our experience of others, our private thoughts and our ways of managing relationships with other people. It is this understanding which gives us security in our own identities, and it is for this reason that there has been an increasing recognition, at least in policy statements even if not always in practice, of the need to respect the language which pupils bring with them to school.

So, in Sweden [SOU, 1983, quoted in Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), 1987], there is reference in official policy statements to society's duty to preserve the child's right to his/her mother tongue and the "*intellectual and emotional disturbance of the child deprived in school of his/her mother tongue*". And that may be compared with the widely quoted sentence from the Bullock Report (DES, 1975) in England that "*no child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold*", though cynics might suggest that in England this sentence has been more often quoted than put into practice.

If my language is *me*, then it follows that to reject my language is to reject me, and that any attempt to develop and change my language is an attempt to change who I am. That is something on which I am likely to have strong opinions. It may be something to welcome as expanding my identity and sense of self. Conversely, if tackled insensitively, it is something that I am likely to see as being threatening to me as an individual and to my ability to make sense of my relationships with others.

2. **The second proposition** is that *this sense of identity comes in large part from the sense of group membership.*

We assert our individual identities by using a style of language which presents to the world our sense of solidarity with a group; we use it to include ourselves in some groups and often we use it to ex-

clude others. This is often the purpose of various kinds of jargon, not least the jargon of academics. It is very clearly seen in Hewitt (1986, p. 107) in which two young black people in London are quoted as quite consciously using language in a way which asserts their sense of identity by asserting their sense of group membership. One is quoted as saying:

> "I feel Black and I'm proud of it, to speak like that. Say I'm walking down the street, and a Black man goes to me, "Dread, do you have the time?" If I say, "No sorry I haven't got the time", I'm gonna sound funny. So I go, "No, man, mi na gat de time, Sorry, Dread".

Another says:

> "[My Mum] never talks Jamaican and my Dad never talks Jamaican. That's why I don't talk Jamaican. Cos I was born here so that I just feel that it's stupid for me to talk that way. It's just like trying to talk French (p. 213)".

Conrad's remark –"*My nationality is the language I write in*"– reminds us that the relationship between language, identity and nationality, though close, is a complex one. Nevertheless, to be committed to the maintenance of a language is to be committed to the maintenance of the group which is defined by that language. That is as true of London Jamaican as it is of Welsh or French.

3. **The third proposition** is that *a shared language is of critical importance in the processes of negotiating, maintaining, defining the shared rules and understandings of such a group.*

A shared language is both a part of the shared culture which defines and gives cohesion to a community and the essential means of maintaining that culture and cohesion. It makes possible the economic and social transactions which maintain the community. It is the means of resolving differences and misunderstandings, of making common policies for the future, and of transmitting the knowledge and the values of the group to future generations. Certainly there is the old joke that Britain and the USA are two countries divided by a common language. The point of that joke, though, is that it is a paradox. It suggests, perhaps, the sometimes unnoticed differences between British English and American English, differences in usage and style as well as simple differences in vocabulary, differences which can produce misunderstanding and which are insidious because unnoticed. And, of course, it is pos-

sible for a common language to be used to sharpen hostilities and jealousies. There is, however, still truth in the view that for many English-speaking people there is a greater sense of community and solidarity with the English-speaking countries of the world than there is with the countries of the European Community, and the common language is frequently cited as an important contributory factor to this sense of community.

4. **The fourth proposition** is that *nation states, and quasi-nation states such as the European Community, are diverse in language and dialect. This produces a dilemma.*

On the one hand there is the need for internal communication and cohesion, and hence for a common language. On the other hand there is the right of individuals and groups to their own identity, in the UK, for example, as Welsh or Punjabi or Geordie. Greater economic integration within the European Community is likely to lead to greater structural and political integration, and if this does happen it will pose problems of language policy for the European Community as a whole.

Different policy models for responding to this diversity can be found in different parts of the world. The tensions, the jealousies and the misunderstandings between groups are resolved to a greater or lesser extent, and the solutions adopted show greater or lesser degrees of stability, but none is without its problems.

The linguistic map of the UK is complex. It is only now beginning to be drawn in any detail, and enormous gaps remain; for example, few outside the communities of Travelers know anything at all about their languages. Clearly, though, there are numerous varieties of English –Geordie, for example, and London Jamaican, Glaswegian and Scouse– each of them playing an important symbolic role in people's lives. The range of languages, and therefore of cultures, to be found in London is shown in the following [Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), 1985]:

> "The 1983 language census, published in November of that year recorded that 50,000 Inner London school children spoke at home a language other than or in addition to English, an increase of 9% between 1981 and 1983. The number of different languages represented went up from 131 to 147 during the same period. Twelve languages account for 83% of these language speakers. In order the twelve are: Bengali, Turk-

ish, Gujarati, Spanish, Greek, Urdu, Punjabi, Chinese, Italian, Arabic, French and Portuguese".

This may be compared with the account of Bradford given by the Linguistic Minorities Project (1986). There, 64 identifiably distinct languages are reported by pupils in schools to have been spoken in their homes. Punjabi and Urdu were much the most common of the minority languages. Other languages included in order of frequency were Gujarati, Bengali, Pushtu, Italian, Polish, Hindi, Chinese and Ukrainian. It should be emphasised that in most cases these are not migrant workers with only limited rights to residence in Britain; they are British citizens with, in theory, the same status as any other British citizens.

At least until recently, in the UK the complexity has been ignored and the stress has been on the teaching of English as a common language for all. That has been taken to imply, for most pupils, teaching English and teaching through the medium of English to the exclusion of other languages, except for the academic study by a few of one or two high-status European languages. Until comparatively recently there was a systematic attempt to eradicate the Welsh language, and Davies (1981) suggests that even in the 1940s and 1950s Welsh was treated by schools as an "*anachronism of little practical use*". Few would now challenge the rights of Welsh speakers in Welsh schools, but as recently as four or five years ago there have been headteachers in Primary Schools in England who have treated the use of languages other than English in the school, even in the playground, as a disciplinary offence.

The tension between the need for a common language and the recognition of linguistic pluralism are evident in current policy debate in England and Wales. The implication of the Bullock Report's call (quoted above) for schools to make active use of the culture of the child in school do not seem to have been accepted by the more recent Swann Report (DES, 1985), which appears to lay most of the responsibility for the maintenance of minority community languages on the communities rather than the schools. It is true that foreign (whatever the word *'foreign'* might mean) language teaching is to be made a compulsory part of the new National Curriculum in England and Wales, though there do seem to be anxieties about the recruitment of enough teachers to implement it. There are also references in the proposals for the teaching of English 5-11 (DES, 1988) to the need for an acceptance of non-standard spoken dialects, although for the rather negative seeming reason that schools cannot do anything to prevent the use of non-standard dialects because they are "*below the level of conscious control*".

Bilingualism is to be respected; the skills of the bilingual child are to be drawn on in discussion of the structures of language; it may even be that in mathematics, for example, assessment (though not, it seems, teaching) should be through the medium of the child's first language. There are in other words some positive, even if heavily qualified, references to languages other than standard English. However, there are, on the other hand, references in the document to children whose first language is not standard English as having language problems or difficulties, and the overwhelming thrust of school practice, as well as public opinion and public policy, is towards standard English. There is for all children "*an entitlement to learn, and if necessary to be explicitly taught the functions and forms of standard English*". That entitlement or right is, in the current usage of educational discussion in England, an offer which may not be refused.

Belgium offers a different model in which "*the language of instruction is that of the region, with the exception of Brussels where it can be a matter of choice so long as the individual resides in one of the nineteen communes of Brussels*" (CERI, 1987, p. 44). Like Switzerland it offers a model "*where the territorial principle of the language of the area or region dominates but one or more of the other national languages is a compulsory second language*" (Banks and Lynch, 1986, p. 142).

Another model is suggested by accounts of the situation in India. Pattanayak (1987) presents an ideal picture of a situation in which identities are recognised and differences are respected, in which groups and individuals work out relationships in which "*the intelligibility is not one hundred percent, but the communication is above survival level and enough to establish the relationship of conviviality*". Pattanayak contrasts this with the inter-communal tensions which he sees as arising from attempts to impose official languages. He suggests that these tensions arise because once "*regional languages became the responsibility of the [individual] states and Hindi of the Centre, Hindi was perceived as a threat, attitudes became hardened and anti-Hindi movements started*".

The picture of groups reaching out towards each other, and, without intervention by state authority, making informal networks of communication as a result of a recognition of the common purposes implied by their common humanity, is an attractive one. However, when he comes to propose an educational policy, Pattanayak inevitably does move towards an imposed solution, though one that is multilingual. He suggests that all pupils should learn through their mother tongue, should secondly learn the language which is dominant in their region,

should thirdly learn Hindi as the token of Indian identity and should fourthly learn English as a "*window to international knowledge and understanding*".

There are obvious practical problems of the availability of time, teachers, and resources for implementing a trilingual or *quadrilingual* policy. However, practical objections may often be the cloak for ideological disagreements about priorities. So, leaving aside practical questions of implementation, one wonders about the problems there might be in reaching some kind of agreement in the European Community about the common language which would be taken, in Pattanayak's terms, as the token of European identity. One wonders too about the acceptability within the Community of English being seen as the appropriate language to enable all to have a wider perspective on the world, particularly if it implied that English, for the sake of economy was also to be adopted as the common language defining the European identity. It is something that would, among other things, disadvantage English speakers by reinforcing their monolingualism. More seriously, problems would arise whatever language or languages were adopted because languages differ in status, and decision about a single common language would involve shifts in the relative status of the languages of the community and therefore of the people speaking them. And that leads to the next proposition.

5. **The fifth proposition** is that *the languages and dialects within any nation state differ in status.*

Groups, and the languages they use, differ in economic, social or political power and prestige. A struggle to establish or maintain economic power can be reflected in the struggle to maintain linguistic dominance. Since some languages provide greater opportunities for access to economic power than others, the resulting pressures on people seeking to secure their own position in the employment market can override the policy prescriptions of educationalists.

In the UK, some kind of Standard English is the dominant language, and the *Thatcherite revolution* was reflected in the changes in the precise version of Standard English which is counted as having high status. As the power of the old landed gentry has decreased so has the prestige of their 'Public School' ('Oxford') version of English. In the UK, most opportunities for employment and the exercise of power demand the ability to use English, and most opportunities for high-status employ-

ment demand the ability to use high-status dialects of English. Partly because of the legacy of the British Empire, and partly because of the economic and political dominance of the USA, English is also a, perhaps even *the,* dominant language in the world. For much the same reasons, such languages as French and German are counted as high-status languages. In Britain, at least, that kind of power does not attach to Gujarati or Bengali or Punjabi or Urdu or London Jamaican or the English dialects of Birmingham and the Black Country.

The result is that the child who is bilingual in English and French is perceived as advantaged. On the other hand, as the Linguistic Minorities Project (1986) points out, the British child who is bilingual in Gujarati and Urdu is perceived as a problem. What the *Linguistic Minorities Project* does not point out is that those perceptions do accurately reflect the opportunities open to each of those children. As a matter of fact to be bilingual in English and French in Britain opens up job opportunities and the possibility of access to power, while to be bilingual in Gujarati and Urdu brings little economic benefit to the individual. It is instructive to compare here what La Belle and White (1980, p. 160) wrote about South Africa:

> "By learning a special curriculum through the mother tongue the African child is exposed to little of the outside world and only enough English and Afrikaans to follow instructions as a worker. Cutting the Bantu off in this way also closes the door to social mobility".

The realities of economic power within the European Community and within the world as a whole, and the pressures exerted by those realities, cannot be avoided in any discussion of language policies to be adopted by schools. Such pressures may in the end force decisions on education systems.

6. **The sixth proposition** is that *to learn a language is to learn a culture.*

It is asserting the importance of communicative competence as defined by Dell Hymes (1971) in his classic paper *On Communicative Competence.* In learning a language we develop *"competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner"*. We need to learn how to be *appropriately ungrammatical* when the cultural context demands. Communicative competence therefore includes and requires a knowledge of the values and

the attitudes of the speech community, its patterns of behaviour and the kinds of criteria it applies to the judgement of human behaviour generally. The implications of this are twofold.

First, there is the fact that for some parents and some pupils there may be a feeling that their existing culture, and the language which both defines and transmits it, is one that they do not wish to have opened up to the possibility of corruption by exposure to other languages and other cultures. Or they may have –as perhaps some English speakers, among others, do have– unquestioned assumption about the superiority of their own language and their own culture. Aparicio (1989) reports an interview with a 16-year-old Portuguese pupil in Britain:

> "They're not happy until they have been told that we are all longing to be English and become totally immersed in their customs and ways of life, and if they have not already assumed that we have changed our nationality then it is obvious that we are going to. They expect us to give up our way of living and what we are forever and yet they can't stay in our country for more than three or four weeks before they start to miss and need things they can identify with".

Secondly, there are clear implications for the style of language teaching and for the materials to be used in language classes. This proposition asserts the value of natural and authentic materials as distinct from materials produced with *language teaching* in mind, when language teaching is defined as teaching points of grammar. It asserts the need to investigate the forms of language as they are in fact used, and to accept the fact that criteria of acceptability change and develop. It asserts the need to explore the functions of language within a range contexts which are authentically part of the communities and cultures of the speakers of the language. Repetition may well be essential to language learning, but that repetition needs to be in realistic and meaningful contexts in which language is used for realistic and meaningful purposes, Donaldson (1978, p. 38) writes:

> "The primary thing is now held to be the grasp of meaning-the ability to make sense of things, and above all to make sense of what people do, which of course includes what people say".

None of that denies the importance of intellectual rigour, of a systematic attempt to understand, and to help pupils to understand, the ways in which languages work. It is, in fact, suggested that such an approach derives from, and demands, a more systematic understanding and awareness of language form and language functions within a cul-

ture than approaches which derive from definitions of language teaching which stress narrow conceptions of grammatical accuracy.

7. **The seventh proposition** is that *language learning requires that the language learner should be motivated to learn the target language.*

To learn to operate in a strange culture is threatening. Established ways of making sense of the world in general, and of human relationships in particular, no longer work for us when we are confronted with unfamiliar cultures, and that by the arguments outlined above can present a threat to our personal identity. That is something which can be tolerated only if we really want to learn that culture, and only if we are helped to come to terms with it in a situation which minimises the threat and attempts to create a sense of security. In language teaching in many British schools, at least until the recent past, neither of those criteria has been met.

First, the international status of English is such that there is little perceived need to learn another language. For pupils that is confirmed by their experiences watching American television or taking their holidays on the Costa Brava. For their teachers it is equally confirmed by their experience of international conferences, even by conferences on language teaching, or by their experience of reading the English bibliographies of English papers on linguistic pluralism.

Secondly, even within the context of language teaching, insecurity has been generated by contexts which do not seek to support fumbling attempts at communication but which instead demand grammatical 'precision' of a kind which is derived from the grammar textbook rather than competencies of native speakers. One head of a Modern Languages Department was heard to say that the French spoken by one of her teachers had been corrupted and made unsuitable for the demands of examination classes by too long a period living in France.

8. **Finally** and of even more general importance *it is the wish to communicate, the sense of community with others, which provides the drive for language learning.*

Where that sense of community is replaced by chauvinistic stereotyping and narrow ethnocentrism it is unsurprising that there is no great stress on language learning. In many British schools there has been no real

acceptance of the validity of other cultures, and no real acceptance of the desirability of learning from them and with them. It may be that economic necessity will drive people to attempt to communicate with each other, but that process will be made easier if we make more systematic efforts to combat stereotypes than we have done in the past.

Milner (1983, p. 78) wrote:

> "British books inevitably view the rest of the world from a British perspective; the quaintness of these images (of the rest of the world) underlines their differences. These people deviate from an unspoken norm; the customs, habits and values which constitute the British way of life. Deviation from the *normal* often connotes inferiority as Kozol explains: "It is not that we were told anything was wrong with looking odd or peculiar, but simply that we were made to feel, beyond possibilities of redemption, that this *oddness*, this *differentness*, this *peculiarity* is something which we can feel ourselves indescribably lucky to have been spared... Things which are made to seem so different, strange, and peculiar are precisely the things which it is easiest to despise".

Such attitudes remain implicit in many of the *images of the world* presented to pupils in schools (Hicks, 1980). They are found much more explicitly stated in much of the popular press in Britain, a popular press which for many people constitutes their only sustained experience of the written word. They are images which schools have a duty to combat not only on moral grounds but on straightforwardly educational grounds: it is the business of education to seek to tell the truth.

The question is how best to combat such stereotypes. Censorship of materials is sometimes taken to be an answer-and indeed faced with the choice of materials which tell the truth and materials which do not tell the truth most teachers would choose the former. However, to start the censorship of books is to set a precedent which is likely to be both dangerous and ineffective. It is ineffective because however much children are protected from materials we count as undesirable in school they are still likely to be exposed to them outside school. It is surely better to confront and explain the stereotypes and the falsehoods, in other words to help pupils to read critically and to help them to see for themselves the dangers of false stereotypes of other peoples. Without some such process it is difficult to see how we can develop in pupils respect for human beings as persons, and respect for truth. And these are the essential characteristics of morality and of education, and the essential preconditions for the sense of community and the wish to communicate which provide the basis for effective language learning.

In conclusion then I would offer the following suggestion for practice –though with the proviso that language teaching, perhaps even more than any other kind of teaching, is concerned with human relationships, a notoriously difficult area in which to offer prescriptions which are both detailed and universally applicable:

(a) Issues of language teaching cannot be dealt with in isolation from the wider political, cultural and economic contexts within which the languages are to be used, That includes helping pupils towards an awareness of the inequalities that exist, an awareness of the nature and causes of conflicts between groups and communities, and an awareness of the relationships between these issues and the nature of language.

(b) Language, whether first or second, is not just picked up; it needs to be learned. It is best learned by use, but language learners can be helped if they are made aware of the nature and functions of language and the processes of language learning.

(c) Some repetition is needed in language learning, but this is best done in natural contexts which are seen as meaningful and purposeful by the learner, and it is best done by exposing the learner to the language as it really is.

(d) Language teaching and learning is most likely to be effective if it accepts and values the existing competencies of the learner, if, in other words, it values the learner as an individual human being.

(e) The climate of relationships in the classroom should be such that the threat of learning is minimised, so that pupils are given the confidence to use language, the confidence to be wrong.

(f) In teaching the language, and therefore the values, of a community we ought to aim at openness and mutual respect, at inclusion rather than exclusion. If this is to be effective, language teachers will have to challenge the transmission of unexamined and untrue stereotypes of other peoples and cultures in all areas of the curriculum, and in the nation as a whole.

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