

Globalization/Englishization: Our Threatened Linguistic Diversity in a New Linguistic World Order

Laila C.A. Helmi ^(*)

Abstract

Historically. The rise and fall of military. Economic. Cultural, or religious powers was accompanied by the rise and fall of their subsequent languages. There is no doubt that English has been rising with the rise of the British empire and the American superpower. It is argued that English has become the most widely-spoken language in the world, with more native speakers and second-language learners than any other language. With the demise of the british empire, its linguistic legacy evolved into what has come to be termed englishes. English has established itself as the language of science, the language of politics, the language of international communication, functioning as a lingua franca in many parts of the world and as one of the main five languages acknowledged by the security council, becoming a blatant epitome of linguistic imperialism.

*Phd. English Department
Faculty of arts-university of Alexandria
And Beirut Arab university

العولمة / الإنجليزية: التنوع اللغوي المهدد في نظام لغوي عالمي جديد

ليلي أحمد حلمي

ملخص

إن بزوغ القوي العسكرية والاقتصادية والثقافية والدينية وانهارها صاحبه تاريخيا بزوغ وانهار لغات هذه القوي، ولاشك أن اللغة الانجليزية قد سطع نجمها مع صعود الامبراطورية البريطانية والأمريكية. وهناك حجج تقول ان اللغة الإنجليزية قد صارت اللغة الأكثر استخداما في العالم، كما ان عدد المتحدثين بها سواء كلغة أم أو لغة ثانية يزيد عن أي لغة أخرى. ومع اضمحلال الامبراطورية البريطانية تطور تراثها اللغوي إلى ما صار يعرف بالإنجليزيات *englishes*. وقد ترسخت اللغة الانجليزية باعتبارها لغة العلوم والسياسة والاتصالات الدولية، فنقوم بدور اللغة الوسيطة *lingua franca* في الكثير من بقاع العالم، كما أنها أحدى اللغات الخمسة الرسمية بمجلس الأمن، لتصبح رمزا من رموز ما صار يعرف بالمبريالية اللغوية *linguistic imperialism*.

1. Introduction

The world is abuzz with languages and tongues; and yet it would seem as if English is the only language we hear⁽¹⁾. Is it simply that we do not/cannot discern the sounds of the other languages? Or is it that we refuse to acknowledge them?

Maybe the best answer to these queries is Director-General of UNESCO, Koïchiro Matsuura's message to the world heralding 2008 as the International Year of Languages. Obviously the world is too intent on communication in English to notice the existence of a myriad of unacknowledged tongues that constitute the linguistic map of the world (see Map (1)). Over the past decades, scholars, sociolinguists and eco-linguists have variously raised alarm, warning of the devastating loss of languages that is expected to happen before the end of the twenty-first century. In his 2001 lecture on globalization and linguistic diversity, Rainer Hamel states that "if actual trends continue, ... up to 90% of the world's 6,000 languages may disappear before the end of the twenty-first century". Isidor Marí quotes the same figures in his 2004 paper. Koïchiro Martsuura warns in 2007 that "within the space of a few generations, more than 50% of the 7,000 languages spoken in the world may disappear". Though there may seem to be a lack of accurate estimates, there is no doubt that the vast linguistic diversity of the world is at best threatened to shrink by half, at worst endangered to shrink by 90% (See table 1). Such figures are no doubt a blatant violation of our Linguistic Rights.

	Early 16 th Century	Early 17 th Century	Early 18 th Century	Early 19 th Century	Early 20 th Century	Late 20 th Century	Early 21 st Century
# World Languages	14,500	13,500	12,000	10,000	7,500	6,703	2,997
# Change from prev.	X	-1,000	-1,500	-2,000	-2,500	-797	-3,706*

* Note: Total loss for 20th Century: 4,503

Source: Globalization Research Center at the University of Hawai'i-Manoa, www.globalhawaii.org

Table (1)

A further violation that endangers the languages of the world, and no doubt silences them is their marginalization: most languages of the world are relegated to limited domestic domains through systematic exclusion from the public sphere. As Matsuura (2007) states:

Less than a quarter of those languages are currently used in schools and in cyberspace, and most are used only sporadically. Thousands of languages – though mastered by those populations for whom it is the daily means of expression – are absent from education systems, the media, publishing and the public domain in general.

The percentage is frightening and the consequences of such mechanisms of exclusion are detrimental to both the speech-communities and the cultures of the remaining 75% of languages. These cultures are obviously marginalized on the global scene, and as such threatened with extinction. In her study of “Language Diversity in an Era of Globalization”, Kyle Weimann (2004) adds a further dimension. She argues that since languages encode cultural knowledge, “When a language dies, the cultural and traditional knowledge that had been transmitted in that language nearly always die with it” (4).

To ratify this situation, UNESCO undertook a number of initiatives over the years, beginning with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights in 1996 (www.linguistic-declaration.org) to heralding 2008 the International Year of languages. The 21st February is International Mother Tongue Day (How many people know of this?!), observed annually to promote awareness of the linguistic diversity in the world. Yet we seem to face a deadlock. The position of scholars varies from bitter cynicism (using war imagery as in Stephen Sberro’s work (2009)), to “naïve” optimism: English sways supreme and is hailed by many as THE global lingua franca. A faithful counterpart to globalization, it has become a factor conducive to the threat of extinction facing many languages of the

world, and has given rise to arguments of linguisticism⁽²⁾, linguistic imperialism and the emergence of a New Linguistic World Order⁽³⁾. More optimistic arguments claim that regionalization as a powerful bi-product and counter-movement to globalization, is a strong subversive force that fosters the rise of regional languages. This paper will give a reading of both sides to the debate, in an attempt to present a clearer picture of the threatened map of our linguistic diversity in the light of the New Linguistic Order as imposed by globalization/Englishization.

There is no doubt that English(-ization) and globalization are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, critical discourse analysts, most prominently Norman Fairclough (2006), maintain that “it is partly language that is globalizing and globalized” (3). Scholars like Robert Phillipson (2009) accusingly state that “English plays a supremely important role in the ongoing processes of globalization” (4). Peter Marcuse (2000) even speaks of “the traps of the Orwellian language of globalization”. As such English has been a major factor in what has come to be termed linguistic imperialism, a phenomenon that poses a threat to many languages of the world. It is a term that circumscribes the dominance⁽⁴⁾ of a language by means of which other forms of dominance are sustained. Cultural, economic and political asymmetries are largely constructed, propagated and maintained through such dominant language which in turn sustains its dominance through such asymmetries. No need to reiterate here, English has currently attained this status. As Phillipson (1992, 2009) maintains, linguistic imperialism

entails unequal resource allocation and communicative rights between people defined in terms of their competence in specific languages, with unequal benefits as a result, in a system that legitimates and naturalizes such exploitation. (2)

Part of the globalizing discourse to enhance this legitimizing and naturalizing system is the establishment of English as the lingua franca of the sciences, of technology, of diplomacy, of successful business relations; the construction of English as THE global language that provides its speakers with badly needed keys to success and

prosperity; and the reiteration on the status of English as the neutral universal tongue spoken by the whole world. Such Englishization is indeed a serious misrepresentation of reality, since it would result in the silencing of the remaining 5999 languages or so of the world. In socio-economic and capitalist terms, the impact is even worse. As Phillipson (2009) points out,

such terms as ‘global English’, ‘Anglophone Africa’, or reference to English as a ‘universal’ lingua franca conceal the fact that the use of English serves the interests of some much better than others. Its use includes some and excludes others. (28)

It is adequate then to speak of a New Linguistic World Order, in which English seeks to topple all other means of communication. In his cynic outlook, Phillipson (2009) indeed speaks of a shift from linguistic imperialism to a form of communicative imperialism (5). Rather than being a tool of empowerment, English in his view has spread parallel with an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, “and with a consolidation of wealth and power globally in fewer hands” (29).

Similarly, the usage of “global village” as a term to describe the world has serious implications for our linguistic diversity. David Crystal, a world authority on languages, discusses this point, explaining that

A village is a close-knit community, traditionally identified by a local dialect or language which distinguishes its members from those elsewhere ... if we cannot discern any unifying dialect or language, or a trend towards such a unity, we need to ask ourselves if this ‘global village’ is anything more than a media fiction. (2006: 6)

It may indeed be “a media fiction”, but of great discursive impact. Obviously the process is not as innocent as described by Crystal. We are not expected to discern a pre-existing unifying dialect or language, but rather be part of the “trend towards such a unity”.

Englishization is the unifying trend that aims at creating a global village where we all speak one language.

On the other hand, Crystal seems to miss the further discursive significance of the emergence of so-called englishes. For him they are but “somewhat like the dialects we all recognize within our own country, except that they are on an international scale” (2003: 144). This definition obviously ties in with the unifying trend needed for the verification of the ‘global village’ metaphor. However, what this definition misses is the political dimension of englishes. These are not mere dialects of English, but in fact conscious cultural and linguistic forms of resistance and subversion to Englishization. They are linguistic forms that seek to empower their users in the global arena while retaining some ties with their own languages and/or cultures. Postcolonially, englishes are one form of striving for one’s linguistic rights.

This takes us to a further significant point, namely the relationship between English and the nation-state and subsequently the superpower(s). As Joshua Fishman (.....) states, “Historically, the rise and fall of military, economic, cultural, or religious powers was accompanied by the rise and fall of their subsequent languages.” English has been rising with the rise of the British Empire, consolidating its power in every colony. The demise of the British Empire was rapidly overhauled by the rise of the USA as a new superpower. However, the equation is no longer that simple.

In his paper entitled “Globalization of Language will Muzzle the Nation-State”, Michael Bell (2010) raises two significant issues: the globalization of language and the impact of that on the nation-state. He provides an interesting historical reading of the role played by language in the creation and establishment of nation-states and the concept itself, concluding that

The nation-state, then, didn’t coalesce until the invention of printing allowed monarchs or governments to educate their citizens in what Benedict Anderson⁽⁵⁾ calls national print-languages.

There are a number of phenomena that can be deduced here. First, we have a process of educating the citizens of the world now in

what we may term the international print-language of the age⁽⁶⁾. As Bell maintains, one of the major impacts of globalization will be the disintegration of nation-states, and “Many of its competencies will be taken on by global bodies or organizations, a process that can already be seen at work in trade, finance and political governance.” (2010) Third, the new global language will create a new global state – so far termed global village. As Kyle Weimann argues, “there is a sense among many who study international relations or ethnic conflict that the adoption of fewer languages may be a net benefit for the world.” (6) Weimann further states that according to these scholars, by “reducing points of conflict” and fostering “international and trans-cultural understanding”, armed violence can be reduced. Globalization and Englishization indeed sound like an Orwellian linguistic plot! It would seem that with the disintegration of nation-states and the reduction of languages in the world to one, Big Brother will wield indisputable power. The New World Order and the New Linguistic World Order will be in place.

Is there hope, then? More optimistic linguists and scholars prefer to answer in the affirmative. Fortunately, they are not merely building castles in the air. As pointed out at the outset of this paper, many linguists have already for decades been raising the alarm, and initiatives have been launched.

Phillipson (2009) provides the keynote for such initiatives. He maintains that “Language plays a central role in the process of creating and counteracting linguistic imperialism. We, therefore, have a moral duty to combat the culture of linguistic oppression” (18). The first initiative, then, should be the consolidation of national languages. Analogous to the nationalist movements that resisted other forms of imperialism, national languages are the main force to counter-act linguistic imperialism. It is interesting that this process is already happening. It can be observed in various manifestations all over the world, ranging from conscious calls for support of the national language, to increased translation into local languages, to higher rates of use of national languages on the Internet. Stephen Sberro (2009) points out that “globalization is often accompanied by a fiercer nationalism or regionalism that often translates in the defense of the

local language status and use. Authenticity and identity are becoming more and more important, not as a contradiction but as a side-effect of globalization” (23).

It is this process of regionalization that can become a powerful subversive movement to the Englishization of the world. It is through regionalization that the linguistic diversity of the world may be sustained. According to Fishman (...) there are about 1.200 standardized languages in the world today, a number that is larger than ever in history before. Isidor Mari (2004) stresses that “Local languages ... maintain a great vitality and functional utility because they are so deep rooted in their immediate natural and social surroundings” (86). There is no doubt that these languages can be supported through adequate language planning policies, which in turn can also create and foster multilingualism necessary for “attaining a more just and equitable politico-linguistic order” (86).

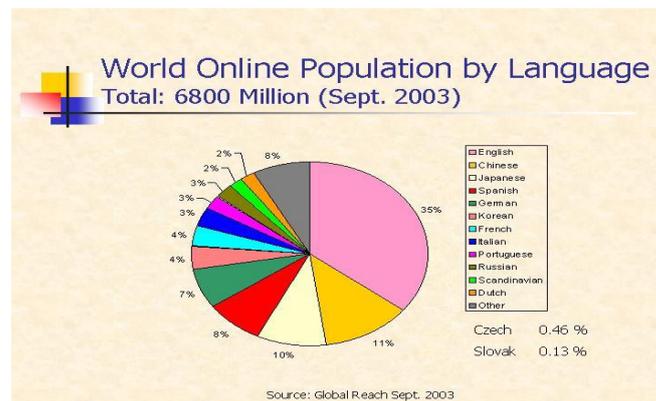
Commenting on the need for multilingualism to combat the threats to our linguistic diversity, Koïchiro Matsuura (2007) (General-Director of UNESCO) highlighted the necessity of language planning policies that encourage the use of first or mother tongues in each respective community. He also called for the encouragement of “speakers of a dominant language to master another national or regional language and one or two international languages”. This may sound like a highly ambitious initiative, but as Kyle Weimann points out, “Humans have an extraordinary ability to learn and speak languages” (18).

The challenge, however, lies elsewhere, namely in the concept of power. On the one hand, language as a signifying system, encodes the values, interests and realities of its speakers. This “translates in modern international relations theory in the notion of “soft power”, the power to impose some ideas and interests other than by sheer strength” (Sberro, 2009: 5). On the other hand, speakers of languages find themselves in “political frameworks of subordination and dependency” (Mari, 2004: 87) that pose constant threats. In other words, linguistic diversity, if not taken in conjunction with “intercomprehension on a world scale” (87) will pose a serious challenge.

A further challenge can be seen in the recent shift of paradigm from the industrial economy of the nineteenth and early twentieth century to a knowledge-based economy (KBE) and information

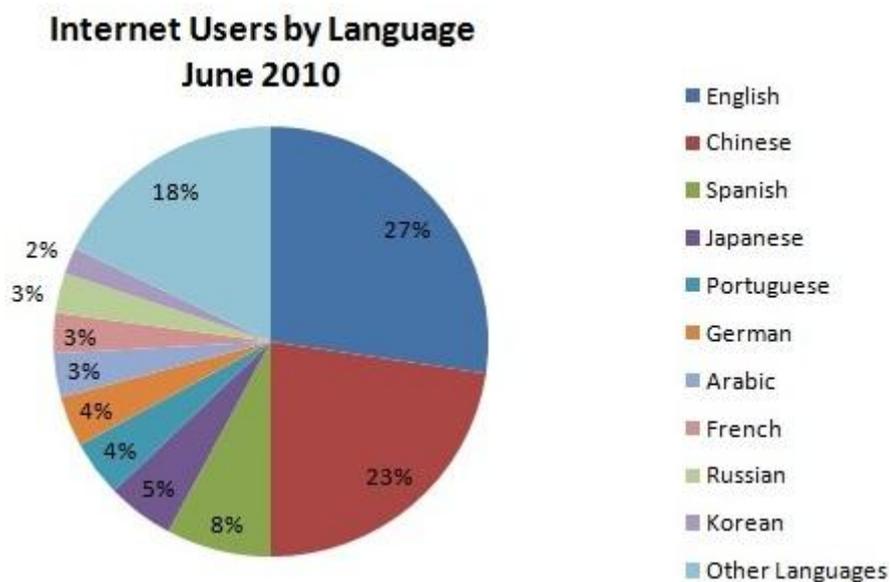
society⁽⁷⁾. The implication of this is tremendous and many-fold. First, there is no doubt that the vehicles of the KBE have come to be mainly the Internet and the media. Both these means of IT rely heavily on language. Until recently this language has been largely English. Though exact figures may be difficult to find, there are numerous estimates “with one study reporting that over 56% of websites are in English – with German a distant second at less than 8%” in 2002 (Wei & Kolko 2005: 207, quoting “Das Internet” 2002). In 2003 English was estimated at 35% of the world online population (see graph 1).

According to Weimann, “In developing countries there is greater usage of regional or state official languages in mass media and communication” (15). The abundance of satellite channels in the Arab World is blatant evidence to that. Similarly, we can observe a proliferation in the use of other languages on the Internet, with the introduction of Arabic domain names, for instance, in May 2010. In 2006, David Crystal had observed the imminent change in the use of languages on the Internet, arguing in his book *Language and the Internet*, that the term ‘Netlish’ is of decreasing usefulness as the Net becomes more multilingual” (19) since Netlish is an obvious derivation from “English”. The Internet is, thus, becoming a powerful platform for language-users to “self-express their nationalism using their own words and language”⁽⁸⁾ (Wei & Kolko, 2005: 208). (See Graph (2) for statistical information of language users on the Internet).

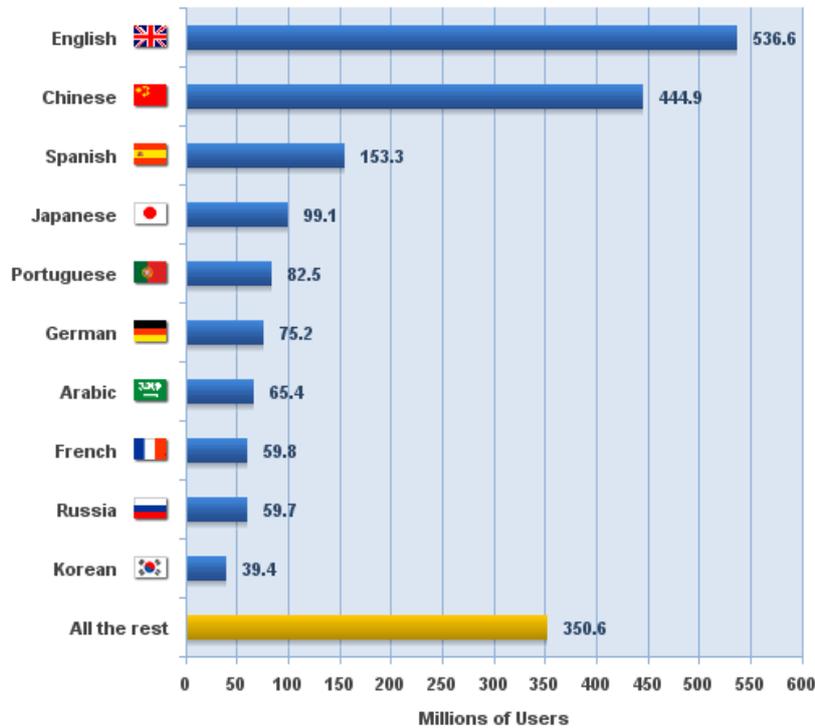


Graph (1)

The most important factor, however, for these means to be subverted into powerful tools for regionalization is the ability to create knowledge, not only to consume it. In a knowledge-based economy, power is derived from the ability to produce knowledge and information. Wei & Kolko (2005) justly argued that “the body of knowledge encompassed by the Internet today is written by the dominant culture and is missing the intertwined, multiple narratives of the marginalized people” (209). The subversion of this situation can only be achieved if the “dominant culture” ceases to be the main, if not sole, source of knowledge. Capitalist relations will be redefined as the unidirectionality of the flow of information is diversified. The emerging multilingualism will give status to the language(s) in which knowledge is created, and re-define power relations. Wei & Kolko argue that “Unlinking language with political



Top Ten Languages in the Internet 2010 - in millions of users



Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm
Estimated Internet users are 1,966,514,816 on June 30, 2010

Graph (2)

power allows cultures besides the dominant ones to theorize about themselves” (208). This cultural/postcolonial perspective further empowers “subaltern cultures to compose and broadcast a media presence” (208). Simultaneously, these languages can only be engaged globally if they are used dynamically, i.e. if they evolve and adapt to current global developments. One major means for linguistic survival under globalization is for a language to face these challenges: “A language that does not innovate to meet the changing needs of a technologically advancing and continually globalizing world is

destined for failure” (Weimann, 2004: 18). There is no doubt that English has established itself as a “global language” that threatens our linguistic diversity. It is, however, also true that relinquishing our right to nurture our own languages is a much greater threat. Languages are not only an indispensable aspect of cultural identity. Indeed “They constitute a strategic factor of progress towards sustainable development and a harmonious relationship between the global and the local” (Matsuura, 2007). In other words, the aim at restructuring the relationship between the global and the local needs to take into consideration a) that such a relationship must be based on equality, and b) a re-charting of the linguistic map of the world.

In the light of this argument, it is my contention that the Englishization of the global linguistic map has contributed to the superimposition of Western knowledge structures and the absorption or destruction of alternative knowledge systems available in other cultures/languages. The information encoded by traditional languages of the world has largely contributed to the collective knowledge of the world, but was soon assimilated into Western production modes, including modes for producing knowledge. The consequences of this globalizing process are grave to the linguistic diversity of the world, since the upcoming generations of speakers of these languages a) grow into western knowledge systems; b) perceive of local knowledge structures as inferior; and c) submit to the hegemony of globalizing/Englishizing forces.

This brings us to the final point in this paper: the issue of linguistic human rights. The broadest definition of linguistic human rights is the right of all speakers to speak, interact, continue their education and preserve their cultures in their mother-tongues. For many activists, the concept of “linguistic human rights” is the framework through which minority languages are protected. Naturally, there were many objections to a formalized declaration that would be binding, mainly because as many state representatives argued at UNESCO

a declaration of this kind – affirming equality among all languages without exception ... - was disturbing for State powers that be (Marí, 2004: 78)

Due to the special nature of the relationship between language and power, such objections are “understandable”: Dominant states, no doubt, would be most resentful, indeed tenaciously resistant, to anything that may affect their power. Dominant states impose dominant languages, and dominant languages preserve the dominance of states.

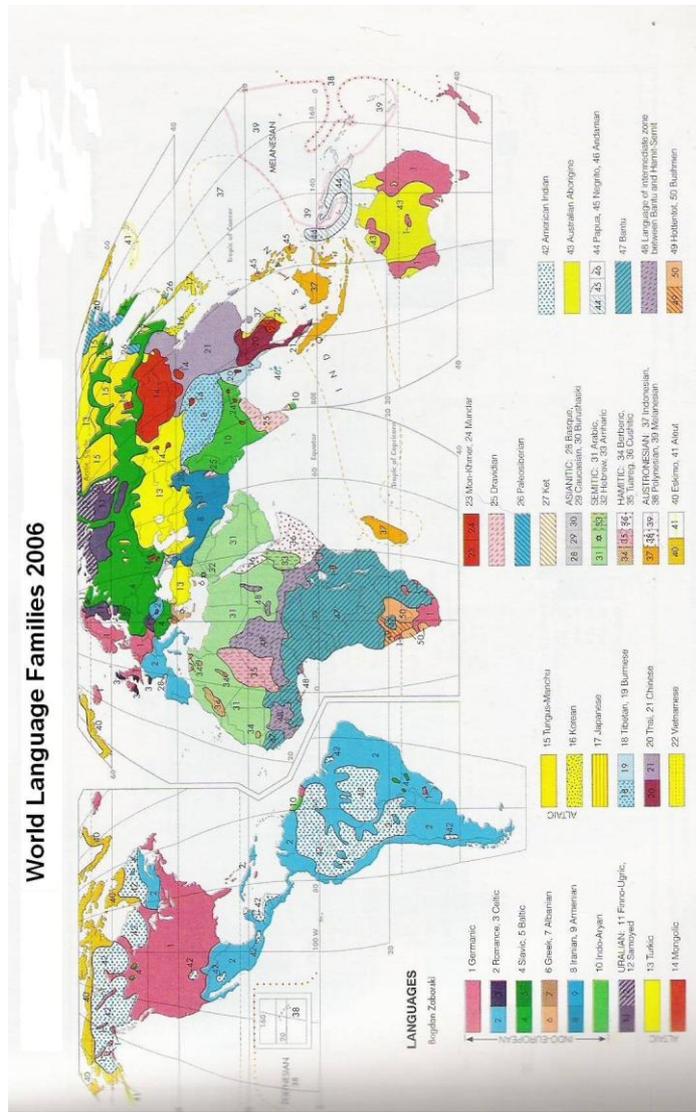
We find, therefore, that languages in the world are not only languages in contact, but often languages in conflict⁽⁹⁾. This necessitates that linguistic human rights be observed, maintained and defended through strongly effective legal instruments and frameworks as well as language planning policies. As Rainer Enrique Hamel maintains (1997)

Linguistic human rights can only be appropriately identified on the basis of a broad sociolinguistic framework and a discursive concept of language that takes into account the pragmatic, metalinguistic and ideological relationships between speakers and their languages. (106)

In other words, languages cannot be protected or defended in isolation. Languages are communicative systems that construct the identity, culture and knowledge of linguistic communities, and structure the discursive and power relations across these communities.

Hence, the sustainability of linguistic diversity⁽¹⁰⁾ in the face of Englishization requires the promotion of world languages in all aspects of life and their recognition at all levels. The discursive conception of the value of world languages and linguistic diversity needs to be reformulated, and states need to be encouraged to promote their internal diversity.

The linguistic map of the world needs to be studied and the languages of the world need to be recorded and archived as a main step towards their preservation.



Map (1)

Notes

- 1 As Joshua Fishman (May 2001) points out, although “English is the mother-tongue of only 380 million people”, it is estimated that “approximately 1.6 billion people – nearly one-third of the world’s population” use it daily in one form or another. (“The New Linguistic World Order”, available online at <http://www.uoc.edu/humfil/articles/eng/fishman/fishman.html>).
- 2 Linguicism was coined by Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas to express a form of racism in which discrimination is based on the language, dialect or accent spoken by a group of people. It also describes the absence of certain linguistic rights.
- 3 Analogous to the politico-economic term “the New World Order”, the New Linguistic World Order can be perceived of as the “hierarchy of standard languages, which mirrors the power relations on the planet” (Alexander, 2005: 1) as a result in fact of both imperialism and globalization. This phenomenon has led to a new linguistic map of the languages of the world, in which innumerable languages and varieties have become extinct, while surviving languages have become either stigmatized or marginalized through the ascent of dominant languages – because of their representation of the most powerful political and economic systems – to what has come to be termed a “global status”. For more, see Neville Alexander’s paper “Linguistic Diversity and Literacy in a Global Perspective” (available online at: http://archive.ecml.at/mtp2/ldl/pdf/alexander_pres.pdf. Accessed in March 2011). See also: Jacques Maurais and Michael A. Morris (eds.) insightful book *Languages in a Globalizing World*. (Cambridge: CUP, 2003). It is an intensive study of the effects of globalization and its socio-political and economic manifestations on the languages of the world and their diversity.
- 4 Neville Alexander and Carole Bloch (2004) distinguish between “the dominance of English ... and the hegemony of English”. As they state, “In our view, the dominance of English, which is driven by market forces – aided and abetted by British, U.S. and other pro-English agencies – is a phenomenon, the continuation of which is tied up with global political and economic developments that go beyond the specificities of cultural and linguistic dynamics.” In their view, the hegemony of English, on the other hand, has a more serious impact upon the speakers of other languages: “One of the most debilitating effects of hegemony is to make speakers of languages other than English – in this case – begin losing faith in the value of their home languages.” (The 29th International Board on Books For Young People (IBBY) Congress, South Africa. Available online at: <http://www.sacbf.org.za/2004%20papers/Neville%20Alexander%20&%20Carole%20Bloch.rtf>. Accessed on 15th March 2011).
- 5 *Imagined Communities*, Verso, 1983.

- 6 In his seminal *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that the imposition of “print-language” was conducive to the creation of nation-states through the imposition of a unified language that also created national identities for the speakers of such languages. Analogous to this argument, it may be claimed that there is a remapping of the world’s linguistic diversity through the imposition of English and its diverse socio-cultural paradigms. Perceiving of English as an “international print-language” allows us to see the world-wide restructuring of educational systems, identities and mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization.
- 7 The terms “information society” and “knowledge-based economy” are generally attributed to the Austrian-American economist Fritz Machlup through his works *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States* (1962) and *Knowledge: Its Creation, Distribution, and Economic Significance* (1982) respectively. The “information society” is a term that describes a society in which the creation, use, manipulation and distribution of information is a major socio-cultural, economic and political activity. “Knowledge-based economy” refers to an economic system that focuses on the production and management of knowledge, and the use of knowledge technologies to produce economic benefits. In other words, knowledge is a tool for economic advancement.
- 8 Wei and Kolko take the rich linguistic tapestry of Uzbekistan as a case-study, elaborating upon how “Uzbeks express their national identity on the Internet” (207) through particular linguistic choices. Their argument is that since the collapse of the Soviet Union language has become a politically sensitive issue, largely because Russian used to be the dominant “career language”. Though there have been active language planning policies implemented by the independent Uzbek government (most prominently setting a deadline in 2005 for the reform of the Uzbek language), the challenge of changing the “inferior” status of the Uzbek language has not been overcome yet. Further Wei and Kolko point out that the official Internet sites – for which there are supposedly Russian, Uzbek and English versions – remain functional only in Russian. For more insightful information and statistics, see “Resistance to Globalization: Language and Internet Diffusion Patterns in Uzbekistan” (*New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*. Vol. 11, Nr. 2, Dec. 2005, pp. 205-220. Available online at: <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan024677.pdf>).
- 9 There are numerous insightful studies of language contact and language conflict. See, for example: Peter Trudgill et al’s *Handbook of Sociolinguistics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2001). Peter Hans Nelde’s “Language Conflict” (available online at: www.uni.vie.ac.at/europaeistik/LanguageConflict.DOC).
- 10 In May 2004, the World Congress on Languages, Linguapax X, was held in Barcelona, premised upon the necessity to preserve the world’s linguistic diversity in the face of globalizing forces. The Report of the Congress states that the objective is: “This Dialogue is designed to bring together all those interested in

the maintenance of linguistic diversity in order to generate fruitful discussions that may be used to impede the current processes of cultural homogenisation of the world". (Available online at: http://www.linguapax.org/congres04/pdf/5_cunningham_ang.pdf. Accessed in March 2011.)

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