

## Minority Languages and Globalization

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 Globalization causes weak and powerful languages to be in increasingly frequent contact. Weaker languages are thus increasingly at risk of being sidelined and lost. The author considers some defensive strategies and concludes that the most likely to be effective are territorial concentration and diglossia and that government support is a major protection.  
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The relation of language to politics can be made either from the point of view of the individual or from that of the language\*. In this article I take the second approach and reify language as one would reify religion, social class, or nation in order to answer the question: What are the successful survival strategies of a minority language that has increasingly frequent contact with more powerful languages. I shall make frequent but non-exclusive reference to the Canadian case, Canada being a rich laboratory for the study of both cooperation and conflict among official languages, aboriginal languages, and the large number of languages brought into the country by a high level of immigration. All these languages are affected by what I have called the Law of Babel.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Law of Babel**

The Bible offers us two major markers for the evolution of a language system in relation to geography: Babel and Pentecost. Babel was unilingual, so much so that the divinity became afraid of its own creation "They all have one language. And nothing that they propose to do will be impossible for them...Come! let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." And God, not satisfied with the confusion of tongues, adds to that punishment the dispersal of the sons of men over the face of the whole earth.

Such a sequence of events, interpreted in terms of linguistics and communications theory, tells us that a social system that is closed and well integrated will move in the direction of unilingualism, while a language system fragmented into isolated communities will move toward multilingualism.

The second marker, Pentecost, relates what happened to the sons of men whose languages had been confused and dispersed when those who were gathered in Jerusalem suddenly understood what the apostles were telling them in a language other than their own. The theological reading of the event is clear: the sacred reunites what had been fragmented in the secular domain. From a purely linguistic point of view we may draw a different conclusion. The very Law of Babel tells us that the various languages brought together in a single city were moving toward unilingualism by way of a bilingualism involving a linguafranca. Such a linguafranca would then be, in the secular field, the equivalent of the Holy Spirit in the religious domain.

The world language system of the 21st century is set somewhere between Babel and Whitsunday. In the era of the global village, various linguafrancas -

English mostly - bring together the speakers of different tongues and put smaller languages at risk of being abandoned, if not by their speakers, at least by their descendants.

If we were to write a natural history of languages, as we write histories of animal and vegetable species, we would note, on the basis of the data available, that a major revolution - little noticed until recently - is likely to have occurred, maybe as early as the 17th century in Europe and as recently as the 20th century in the rest of the world.

Writing in the 1950s, A.Cailleux estimated that major languages such as Chinese and Latin had had, through their descendants, a positive birth rate.<sup>2</sup> Over the past millennium, more languages had been born than had died. Had Cailleux taken small and very small languages into consideration, such as those found in India (about 300 and over 1000 if one includes the dialects), Cameroun (some 400) or Papua New Guinea (over 700), his birth rate statistics would have been far more positive than his two births for one death.

Fifty years later, all reports by ethnologists coming from Asia, Africa, and the Americas note that languages are dying much more frequently than new languages are born<sup>3</sup>. Such reversal of an evolution dating back, in all likelihood, to the very origins of humanity, is to be explained by the increased concentration of populations, a process begun well before the term "globalization" became a key word in the social sciences.

What applies to languages applies also to plants or animal species but, unlike the latter, languages in contact cannot ignore one another. If they meet, they form hierarchies, and in the long run, with exceptions to which we shall turn our attention later, the strong reduce the effectiveness of the weak and eventually eliminate them.

Consider some Canadian examples<sup>4</sup>. At the time of colonization of what is now Canada, 66 different languages were spoken. The arrival of French and English had a devastating effect. Ten of those languages are now dead and most of those that survive are barely alive. In the 1970s, the federal government proposed to abolish the system of reserves but was opposed by most Aboriginal leaders who did not want the change, in part for financial reasons and for fear that they would lose power and status, but also because abolition would have hastened assimilation into the dominant culture. However, even though preserved, the Aboriginal reserves are under increased daily pressure from either French or English, mostly the latter, which penetrate first nations communities through contact with civil servants, doctors, teachers, and business people, and through radio, television, and newspapers. Since nearly all Aboriginal languages are spoken by less than 20,000 people, efforts made to maintain and expand their present use are likely to have limited effects. Even the languages spoken by more than 20,000 individuals (Inuktitut and Cree have some 60,000 speakers each, Ojibway 50,000, Dakota 20,000) are in a difficult position. Among the latter, Inuktitut has the best prospects because of its concentration and isolation in the North, but it will have to cooperate with English to insure its survival.

The destruction of the languages of recent immigrants is even more dramatic than that of the Indian and Inuit communities because immigrants are not as geographically isolated from the official language populations and do not generally object to linguistic assimilation for the sake of social integration and advancement. A study dating from the 1970s in Canada's major urban centers indicated that the use of the incoming non-official languages dropped to about 10% in the three generations of a family history<sup>5</sup>. A survey done in Toronto in

the mid-1980s measured a comparable drop to 12% for Ukrainian and 1% for German on a question recording the respondent's mother tongue<sup>6</sup>.

The concentration of Chinese migrants in a city such as Vancouver, where the number of Chinese speakers increased from 5% to over 25% in less than a generation, may result in better language maintenance, but, in all likelihood, that maintenance will be as a second and mostly as a spoken language, the actual rate of retention depending primarily on the rate of language endogamy.

Many other examples could be given of the Babel geographical concentration effect. That effect is observable also in the case of non-geographically rooted networks with dense communication systems. Take the case of chemistry as a scientific discipline. In recent years, over half a million chemistry articles have been published each year in 70 different languages. That might appear reassuring for linguistic diversity but, in fact, 69 of the 70 are not really in the race. In 1980, 65% of the articles noted by *Chemical Abstracts* were written in English; in 1990 the percentage rose to 75%, and in 2000 to 83%. In 2000, German and French, which dominated the field in the 19th century, have fallen to 1% and 0.4% respectively<sup>7</sup>.

Will that trend be reversed? In a recent article, Pierre Favre predicted such a reversal in the relatively near future thanks to the use of computers outpacing the memory and connection capacities of the human mind, computers that would offer instant and accurate translations of what chemists and other academics have written in their own language<sup>8</sup>. However, judging by the present limited effectiveness of automatic translation, my bets are still on a Holy Spirit effect that takes the form of a lingua franca rather than that of a computer.

The Babel effect is reinforced by what I have called the 'love that kills' phenomenon. If two speakers, each having a different tongue, love each other and live together, their languages are at war.

Let us take an example from the Canadian family census of 1995, which gives measures of languages learned and used by all family members. Let us take at random married woman in Ontario whose mother tongue is French. What are her chances of using French habitually at home in a province that is only 5% 'French mother tongue'? If her husband has French as a mother tongue, her chances are 85%, but if her husband's mother tongue is English, her chances drop to 16%.<sup>9</sup>

At the level of nations, as at the level of families or individuals, languages form hierarchies shaped by the Babel and Pentecost effects. It follows that the defensive strategies of minority languages will vary according to where they stand in the hierarchy, but in all cases the strategy will involve some kind of separation, either spatial, social, or cultural.

### **Territorial separation**

Languages tend, on their own, to concentrate in space to facilitate communication and to defend against penetration, but dominant languages tend also to expand over the territory of less powerful competitors. A minority language will thus need, most of the time, the help of political institutions to obtain and retain control of its borders.

The most systematic example of a territorial solution to language contact is offered by Switzerland, which has divided its own territory by rigid linguistic internal boundaries that separate French, Italian, and German.

Switzerland tells its citizens: you can move freely across the whole territory of the state, settle where you want, and vote wherever you settle, but your language is not transportable across linguistic borders, at least in the public domain. The rationale for this very constraining regulation is given by a ruling of the Federal Tribunal (the Swiss supreme court) when it rejected a complaint by a Ticino businessman who objected to being forced by cantonal legislation to advertise his products in Italian.

" ..The linguistic borders of our country, once fixed, must be considered to be unchangeable; the certainty for each original segment (souche) of the population of the integrity of the territory throughout which its language is spoken and over which its own culture extends constitutes the safeguard of the harmonious relationships of the various parts of the country, and the right of each to forestall any encroachment must be recognized." (author's translation from Héraud).<sup>10</sup>

The ruling offers an application of the 'strong fences make good neighbors' principle, a principle applied also in the Aaland Islands to protect Swedish from Finnish<sup>11</sup>, and applied as well in Belgium to separate French and Dutch, though less systematically than in Switzerland since Brussels is an officially bilingual region set between Dutch Flanders and French Wallonia.<sup>12</sup>

A less constraining variety of language territorialization is used in mainland Finland, where bilingual districts are intended to protect Swedish. A district's existence is, however, subject to the minority population remaining at the level of either 8% or 3000 individuals, a condition less and less likely to be met or to be effective since use of Swedish as a first language has fallen in 100 years from 15% to about 5% of the population<sup>13</sup>.

Canada rejected the Swiss model by favoring bilingualism by territorial superimposition rather than by juxtaposition of its two official languages, while Quebec moved closer to the Swiss system by requiring that new immigrants send their children to primary and secondary French schools. However, the right given to Canadian citizens to send their children to Quebec's English schools if one of the parents or one of their children has been educated in English in Canada prevents Quebec from having as secure a grounding of its dominant language, dominant in Quebec but very much a minority in North America.<sup>14</sup>

Partial territorialization of the Quebec variety is not ideal for Quebec, but, in some cases, it will be the only available alternative. In such cases the minority language will need to combine individual bilingualism with territorial isolation of the weaker language for the performance of specific social functions such as education. This is what small university colleges did in the Anglophone Canadian west where St Boniface in Winnipeg and St Jean in Edmonton located their own small campuses away from those of the major anglophone universities in order to reduce linguistic interference and to create the 'at home feeling' that the Swiss tribunal identified as the condition needed for harmonious relationships among different language communities.

### **The ladder**

When a language previously secure in the performance of all its social functions - as was French in France a few decades ago - suffers a serious decline in performance in a given domain, chemistry or medicine for example, a natural reaction will be to take defensive measures by trying to reverse the situation. If it is not reversible, such measures can actually be harmful to the language one wants to protect because of the waste of time, energy, and resources. A more

rational response, easier to adopt by small languages such as Finnish or Dutch, consists in accepting the unavoidable and turning it to advantage, the advantage one gains over languages that fail to adjust.<sup>15</sup>

Paradoxically, such adaptation may require facilitating acquisition, as a second language, of the very language that makes irreversible gains. That second language, typically a lingua franca, can then be used as a ladder that one will ascend to see and be heard beyond the walls of one's tongue, a ladder which is English at present on the world stage, but which may also be a small language such as Swahili at the regional level.<sup>16</sup>

A policy of official unilingualism at the territorial level is not incompatible with the promotion of individual bilingualism. One does not live on a ladder, one climbs it from time to time. The Pasteur Institute was being rational when it decided to publish its Review in English. Similarly, it is right for Quebec universities to encourage their researchers to publish in English while insisting that French be the classroom language.

### **The crutch, the mask, and the pin**

When a minority language can no longer be a language of overall communication within a given community attached to that language, its survival strategy will be to acquire a more powerful language and to limit the use of the more valued but less powerful tongue to domains where it does not conflict with the language of wider coverage.

Diglossia, as practised in Alemannic Switzerland, offers a good example of collaboration rather than conflict between two modes of speech.<sup>17</sup> High German is used in writing and in speech in the public domain outside the area covered by one's dialect or its koine, while the latter are used within the dialectal area, typically the canton. Two languages thus collaborate in separating the private from the public, the local from the national, the formal from the informal. The boundaries separating the two languages are partly geographical but mostly social and psychological. The two languages behave like crutches for each other in order to increase overall communication effectiveness. As long as the two domains that sustain the diglossia remain sufficiently distinct, this type of bilingualism can be relatively stable and free of conflict.

All languages have two functions: to communicate and to exclude. Any language can thus be used as a mask. Among the 4000 to 7000 languages spoken in the world today, even the most numerous and most often used are not understood by a majority of humanity. This wall effect can be used to separate in- from out-groups, notably when the out-group uses the dominant language.

Using a language as a mask can be effective, even for languages with very limited vocabularies. Consider the following anecdote. The University of British Columbia is situated on what used to be hunting grounds for the Musqueam people, who still have a reserve at the university gates. Their language, Musqueam, is one of the disappearing aboriginal tongues. It is the dominant language of only one person, who is in her nineties. The university decided recently to preserve what could still be preserved of the language and to teach its rudiments, notably to young members of the band. One of the first requests of these young people was that they be taught the language of soccer which has no roots in the Musqueam culture. They wanted to be on equal footing with a nearby team that used Greek to communicate among themselves during games.

Finally, the last retrenchment of a language will take the form of a simple marker, the equivalent of a pin on one's lapel, that need not be used in speech or writing but solely to signal one's group identity, one's ethnic belonging. A few words, or the right accent, will suffice to send signals that cannot be dismissed as unimportant if they are used to trigger solidarity.

In conclusion: does the evolution of a language, does its rise or decline escape the influence of political and administrative linguistic regulations? Admittedly, no language will survive long if its speakers no longer want to use it, but even in sharp decline all languages can be guided and protected to some extent. For that protection the assistance of a political guardian is essential. Marshal Lyautey once said, when the French Academy was debating the definition of the word 'language,' that a language was a dialect with an army and a navy. We should add that, even in the absence of an army or a navy, a language can be helped significantly, at least in the short and medium terms, by the support it receives from a government - local, regional, or national (preferably all three) - a government that can determine language use in the schools and in the public service. Such government support is all the more crucial at a time of globalization when a minority language can rely less and less on unregulated social and geographical isolation to guard its borders.

#### Notes

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- 1. See J.A.Laponce <<Retour   Babel>> *Revue fran aise de science politique*, (2001)483-493. English version 'Politics and the Law of Babel' *Social Science Information*, vo.42 no. 2 (2001) 179-94. See also J.A. Laponce 'Babel and the Market : geostrategies for minority languages' in J. Maurais and M. Morris (ed.), *Languages in a Globalising World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 58-63.
- 2. See A.Cailleux, <<l' volution du langage>>, *Soci t  pr historique fran aise* (1953, v.9) 325-40.
- 3. Among others, see J-L Calvet *Linguistics et colonialisme : petit trait  de glottophagie* (Paris: Payot, 1974), D. Crystal *Language Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), M. Krauss 'The World language in Crisis' *Language* (vol. 68, 1993, p.6-10), D. Graddol *The Future of English* (London: British Council, 1997). For updated reports on the world language system, see the following sites:<<http://safir.ling.yale.edu>>;<[endangered-languages-l@cleo.murdoch.edu.au](http://endangered-languages-l@cleo.murdoch.edu.au)>, <http://www.terralingua.org>.
- 4. See C.R. Foster 'Canada's Indigeneous Languages: Present and Future', *Language and Society*, (1982, p.7-12). J.A. Laponce 'Minority Languages in Canada: Their Fate and Survival Strategies' in A. Lapierre, P.Smart, and P. Savard (eds.), *Language, Culture and Values in Canada at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1996)p. 77-88).
- 5. K.G. O'Bryan et al. *Non-Official Languages : A Study of Canadian Multiculturalism* (Ottawa: Government Supplies and Services, 1976).

6. Raymond Breton, *Ethnic Identity and Equality* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1990).
7. See more detailed statistics in J.A. Laponce, *Languages and Their Territories* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1987 and in J.A. Laponce, 'The Case for Ethnolinguistic Federalism in a Multilingual Society' in J. Coakley (ed.) *The Territorial Management of Ethnic Conflict* (London: Frank Cass, 2003, p.23-44).
8. P. Favre 'Retour à Babel? L'oubli des machines. Une objection à Jean Laponce' *Revue Française de Science Politique*, (51,5,p. 807-16).
9. For statistics of other regions of English Canada, see Laponce, 2003.
10. J.Héraud, *L'Europe des Ethnies* (Paris: Presses d'Europe, 2nd ed., 1974)
11. For the Aaland regime see K. McRae, *Conflict and Compromise in Multilingual Societies: Finland* (Waterloo: Waterloo University Press, 1997).
12. L. Domenicelli *Constitution et régime linguistique en Belgique et au Canada* (Bruxelles :Bruylant, 1999)
13. K. McRae, 1997.
14. For a study of Canada's language laws, see C.M. MacMillan, *The Practice of Language Rights in Canada* (Toronto; Toronto University Press, 1998).
15. See Laponce in Maurais, 2003. For a comparison and measure of the communication pay offs of different bundles of languages known to a given individual in a particular language system see A. de Swaan, *Words of the World*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001). See also F. Grin *Compétence et récompense: la valeur des langues en Suisse* (Fribourg : Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1999) For the social and political problems posed by the monetary advantages accruing to the speakers of a linguafranca in much demand see P. Van Paryjs 'The Ground Floor of the World: On the Socio-economic Consequences of Linguistic Globalization' *International Political Science Review*, 2000, p. 217-234.
16. A.Mazrui and A. Mazrui *The Power of Babel: Languages and Governance in the African Experience* (Chicago: Chicago University Press.
17. K.McRae, *Conflict and Compromise in Multilingual Societies: Switzerland* (Waterloo: Waterloo University Press, 1984). See also Grin, 1999.

**Short Bio**

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