

## Language: medium, barrier, or Trojan horse?

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This is not my title. I was given it by person or persons unknown. I therefore have to deconstruct it, in order to know what it is I am supposed to be talking about.

It seems to be a well-chosen title, for a linguistic contribution to a conference on cultural diplomacy. It illustrates two major steps in the development of our ideas about the functions of language, and throws in a controversy for good measure.

The standard view is that the chief function of language is to act as a medium of communication. This is what most people think language is for: to foster intelligibility, to express ideas meaningfully from one person or group to another. If people are using different languages, then that is an unfortunate but temporary difficulty, which can be resolved through translation and interpreting, or through bilingualism - especially the learning of a common language, or lingua franca. This is the *intelligibility* view of language. And for some who see this view as paramount, in an ideal world there would be just one language.

In recent years, linguists have drawn repeated attention to the existence of other important functions of language, one of which is especially relevant to this conference. This is language as the means of expressing identity: who we are (as an individual or a group), where we are from (regionally, socially, occupationally). It manifests itself both interlinguistically, in the form of the individual languages which identify nation states or ethnic groups, and intralinguistically, in the form of the local accents and dialects which reflect where we were brought up. This is the *identity* view of language. For those who see this view as paramount, linguistic diversity is a good thing, and a world with just one language in it would be a disaster.

The two views are not equal, in relation to the range of emotions they instil. When language hits the headlines around the world - riots, hunger strikes, marches, banners - it is always in relation to the identity function. People may be worried about the need for plain English, or about split infinitives, but they do not threaten to fast to the death in support of them. On the other hand, people are prepared to fight and die to preserve their language, in the face of threats - there are many famous cases, such as in Quebec, India, Belgium. Even dialects can be the focus of contention, as the recent controversy over Ebonics in California illustrates. And the very question of whether a variety is a language or a dialect is a real issue in several parts of the world, as the ongoing reinterpretation of Serbo-Croatian as Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian illustrates.

The issues have come to the fore in the 1990s, and especially in 1997, because people have suddenly come to realize the dangers facing the world's languages. Of the 6000 or so languages in the world, it is estimated that at least 50% will be dead within the next 100 years. The processes underlying globalization are steadily taking their toll. International awareness has slowly been turned into action, through such bodies as the UNESCO Clearing-House on Endangered Languages in Tokyo (1992) or the Foundation for Endangered Languages in the UK (1995). The anxieties of the many minority languages are also gradually achieving expression - most recently in the form of a draft Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, formulated in Barcelona last year, and currently travelling somewhere within the UNESCO or UN bureaucracy. I shall quote from this below.

The two views - language as intelligibility and as identity - have often been seen as being in conflict with each other, as presenting a matter of choice. In a bilingual or multilingual community, such as Wales, English (which guarantees intelligible communication with the outside world) is often seen as a threat to Welsh (which guarantees identity with the ethnicity of the population). A similar situation applies in all countries where there are minority groups (which probably means all countries, these days), and can be a ready source of emotional confrontation. We can see this currently in the USA, where the demands of immigrant groups to have their ethnic languages fostered has prompted the emergence of an 'official English' movement, concerned to preserve the linguistic integrity of the Union. There are many parallels.



The linguist's view is that conflict is not inevitable; that one does not have to be forced to choose. It is perfectly possible to develop a situation in which a person uses one language for intelligibility and another for identity. This is part of what we usually mean by *bilingualism* - which is, incidentally, the normal human condition. Some two-thirds or more of the human race live in a multilingual setting, and speak two or more languages. It is a perspective which those from monolingual countries, such as the UK or USA, fail to appreciate. Fostering a climate of positive bilingualism, in which intelligibility and identity are in balance, is the way forward - and already exists, of course, in several countries, such as Switzerland and Finland. At the same time, a wide range of political and economic factors militate against it. Bilingualism is expensive. Minority rights are not always palatable to majority governments. Within large institutions (such as the European Union), the language planning issues are horrendous - and as yet unsolved - as countries jealously guard their linguistic positions.

The competing pressures which affect different languages can also be observed within a language - and especially within a language which comes to be used internationally. The recent trend which has made English a genuine world language - in the sense that it now has a privileged position in every country, either as first, second, or foreign language - has caused the emergence of intelligibility/identity conflicts. We can see this particularly in those countries where English has been adopted as a second language. Several 'New Englishes' have emerged in the last 30 years, in which a degree of linguistic 'distance' (chiefly in vocabulary and pronunciation) distinguishes the kind of English spoken in a particular country from that used by its colonial forebears. Examples include Ghana, Nigeria, Singapore, India, and some 50 other countries.

The emergence of these differences has raised the spectre that the English language will eventually fragment into mutually unintelligible spoken forms, much as Latin once did. This is unlikely for two reasons: standard written English exists, in printed form and on the Internet, all over the world, and acts as a strong unifying force; and a standard spoken English (though not yet developed) is likely to appear as more countries become linked through satellite television. The standardizing influence of a medium of this kind does not take long to make itself felt. We are therefore looking towards a world in which people become even more multidialectal in their own language than they are now. Many people already use one variety of English at home, and another in public, within their own country;

one for informal use, another for formal use; in due course, this is likely to be supplemented by the use of a third variety for international communication.

World Standard Spoken English is only in its infancy, but it is beginning to be observed in gatherings such as international conferences, where culturally specific allusions can be a cause of disquiet. For example, an American speaker who decided to express his argument using an extended metaphor from baseball would not achieve the intelligibility he desired, and the audience would let him know it; nor would a British speaker deciding to use such a metaphor from cricket. I have seen this happen. It is my experience that it only takes one listener to draw attention to the fact that a cultural metaphor is not understood for it to become a point of contention, and for the speaker to avoid it thereafter.

That is why I am not very impressed by the Trojan Horse allusion. I'm not sure who first thought of it: the earliest reference I have is to Cooke (1988), who uses it with reference to English as the language of imperialism and of particular class interests. The restriction to the case of English is unfortunate. Indeed, there are those who seem to think that English is the only cause of what they call 'linguistic genocide', because of its growing world status - the issue is presented by both Pennycook (1994) and Phillipson (1992). But the fact that one language threatens another is a universal feature of the human linguistic condition, and not something restricted to English. In South America, for example, the loss of hundreds of Amerindian languages has been almost totally the result of the impact of Spanish and Portuguese. English has nothing to do with it. We do not know how many languages have been lost as a result of the expansion of Chinese, over the past 3000 years, but it must also be hundreds. Whatever the issues are, relating to language death, they go well beyond English. However, as English is the topic of the moment, I shall restrict my discussion to that.

The Trojan horse metaphor can mean several things - causing language death, perpetrating an alien class system, introducing an alien belief system, even (as Phillipson argues, p. 166) imposing a whole new mental set. The argument goes something like this. There is a very close connection between language and thought. The way we talk influences the way we think - perhaps even necessarily conditions our thinking. So, when people adopt a language as a lingua franca, they are going to be forced to think in the ways laid down by that language. They will find themselves, without realizing it, inevitably being drawn into the culture which is reflected in that language - and this will begin to influence their own view of the world, and perhaps even replace their original view. The language, on this account, is the



Trojan Horse: hidden within it are the cultural biases and perceptions of the invaders, and once some of them have taken root within their new locale, the gates will be opened, and acculturation on a massive scale will take place.

There are several reasons why this account is wrong.

The view has long been discounted that language necessarily conditions our thinking - that our mother-tongue puts us in a straightjacket which is totally inflexible and from which we cannot escape. Our common experience is to the contrary. A single set of beliefs or propositions can be expressed equivalently in a variety of languages, as is routinely the case in international politics or religion. It is also obvious that a single language can be used to express an unlimited number of fundamentally different mindsets. But leaving aside this extreme account of what has been called 'linguistic determinism', is there a weaker perspective which we might espouse? Does language influence our cultural thinking sufficiently for the Trojan horse metaphor to mean anything at all? I think not.

First, this metaphor overestimates the amount of language which is capable of expressing a unique cultural identity. There are many branches to the study of language structure and use: to name just four - sounds (phonology), grammar, vocabulary, and what is these days called pragmatics (our use of conversational strategies, norms of politeness, and so on). But not all are equally involved with culture. Phonology and grammar are involved only in a rather abstract way - for example, do languages which recognize masculine and feminine nouns see objects in a more sexual way than languages which do not? Pragmatic issues are important, but they have been little studied. So I will restrict the discussion to vocabulary, and reformulate the question as: Does 'English vocabulary' reflect a uniquely 'English culture'?

My answer is no - or perhaps, not very much. The core fallacy is the belief that a language is a culturally homogeneous entity. But no language is. English may be a Germanic language, as far as grammar is concerned; but it is a predominantly Romance language, as far as vocabulary is concerned. Three-quarters of English vocabulary is made up of loanwords. English has always welcomed words from other languages, for over 1000 years. Over 120 languages have helped English vocabulary to grow to its present state. This means, of course - if you persist in using the metaphor - that there are 120 Trojan horses already inside English - producing a combined cultural effect that it would be absurd to try to calculate. When people complain about English infiltrating their language, they usually forget that their

language may have infiltrated English first. I always find it ironic that the French, for example, are currently objecting to *le computer* on the grounds that it is anglicizing their minds and culture - when *computer* derives from Latin, the mother-tongue of French.

It is naive to look for a simple relationship between language and culture. The relationship is complex and varied. Some words do seem to capture a strong cultural nuance - a French word such as *chic*, for example, or an American English word such as *Thanksgiving*. But most words are not like this: they do not carry such a nuance. When the French began to object to *le weekend* and other such words, it was the word they are objecting to, not the culture. They already had weekends. And it remains to be demonstrated that there is something specifically British or American about *the weekend* which was not already present in *la fin de la semaine*. Most loanwords are like this. The fact that I fluently order *pizza* from my local takeaway does not turn me into an Italian - but it has made me appreciate more than before the value to the world (in this one tiny respect) of what it means to be Italian.

Nothing is to be gained by oversimplifying complex issues. Yet oversimplifications are everywhere. For example, in a comment on the English Only movement in the USA, Crawford (1989) argues that 'for those who resent the presence of Hispanics and Asians, language politics has become a convenient surrogate for racial politics' (1989: 14). He neglects to observe that the chairman of US English, the leading American organization involved, is himself a native Chilean Spanish immigrant. Plainly, the issues are more complex than can be captured by any 'good guys' vs 'bad guys' scenario.

That is perhaps the main reason why the Trojan horse argument is misleading. It presents us with a 2-valued, good vs bad model - Greeks vs Trojans. In a military confrontation, there is no possibility of being both. But in the matter of language use, it is normal to be both. The Trojan horse metaphor underestimates the ability of language users to cope with more than one kind of cultural awareness. Every language-learning experience can teach me something about the culture it expresses. That is the value of diversity. Whatever culturally specific items of language I encounter point me in the direction of these cultural identities. They confront me with them, and if I wish I can allow myself to be assimilated by them. But it does not have to be that way. People who are genuinely bilingual do not find that their cultural identity in either language is threatened by the presence of the other. The learning of other languages will always make your humanity grow, but it does not have to be at the expense of losing what you already have.



Language is not a Trojan horse. The general experience is that language follows culture; it doesn't precede it. If people in Moscow or Paris now think of the letter *M* as meaning *McDonalds*, rather than *Metro*, it is because the restaurants are these days so prominently established. A word does not get borrowed until there is a cultural peg to attach it to. If anything, it is the culture which is the Trojan Horse - or, I suppose, in the McDonalds example, the Trojan Cow. The language creeps in inside the culture, not the other way round. So: if we don't like what is happening in the world, culturally, then we need to blame the culture we see responsible, not the language used to express it. And if we don't want to see cultural bias in our teaching materials, we must look to the content of those materials, not the language.

This is not to deny that there are those who have aggressively promoted language learning programs specifically designed to change or mould people's identity - to help immigrants become 'better Americans', for example. Missionary activities around the world are often criticised from this point of view. Doubtless also there are many countries where people in power wish to preserve a status quo - to preserve an exclusive class system which requires others to learn English if they wish to become a part of it (the 'English as a gatekeeper' issue). But a reaction to these attitudes is these days becoming increasingly apparent. The matter has been openly discussed, at all political and intellectual levels - most notably, in relation to the question of human rights. The new vision is one in which languages are equal, and all language communities and individuals have certain rights. Section V of the proposed Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, is entirely devoted to Culture. I quote from the latest draft.

#### Article 41

1 All language communities have the right to use, maintain and foster their language in all forms of cultural expression.

2 All language communities must be able to exercise this right to the full without any community's space being subjected to hegemonic occupation by a foreign culture.

#### Article 42

All language communities have the right to full development within their own cultural sphere.

#### Article 43

All language communities are entitled to access to the works produced in their language.

#### Article 44

All language communities are entitled to access to intercultural programmes, through the dissemination of adequate information, and to support for activities such as teaching the language to foreigners, translation, dubbing, post-synchronization and subtitling.

#### Article 45

All language communities have the right for the language proper to the territory to occupy a pre-eminent position in cultural events and services (libraries, vidiotheques, cinemas, theatres, museums, archives, folklore, cultural industries, and all other manifestations of cultural life).

#### Article 46

All language communities have the right to preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage, including its material manifestations, such as collections of documents, works of art and architecture, historic buildings and inscriptions in their own language.

If such a frame of reference is adopted, it will become increasingly difficult for authors to inadvertently introduce cultural bias into their materials - for instance, by choosing only examples of American or British writers, and no writers from the learner's country; or by undervaluing local religions, arts, or history. Gone are the days when cultural bias in English language teaching materials was universally unrecognized. Indeed, it is now the biggest talking point among those who write these materials - whether the issue is one of gender, class, religion, ethnicity, age, or any of the other variables which when taken to extremes are labelled 'political correctness', but when managed sensibly and sensitively demonstrate a highly valued egalitarianism. Neville Grant, an experienced ELT author, reflects the mood of the times when he says (1996): 'In all the material development projects I have been involved in, a priority has been to reflect national social and cultural aspirations'. Apart from anything else, the receiving countries themselves are now very aware of the issue, and scrutinize course materials carefully before accepting them - as Grant found when he was developing a course for China where, as he says, "'knowing about" the world outside definitely did not mean identifying "with" it'.

A positive perspective is also in evidence. We can teach English, and at the same time teach what it means to be a speaker of English (in the learner's own country as well as abroad). We can draw attention to the importance of local languages, and to the limitations as well as the strengths of using English. For instance, in one country there may be a deep-rooted concern that the use of English perpetuates local divisions arising out of colonial days. In another,



English may not be so useful for getting a job. There is no reason why such issues should be excluded from the syllabus - though how they are introduced sensitively is a tricky matter for teachers and syllabus designers. This is what I understand Pennycook's notion of a 'critical pedagogy' to be all about; and I assume it needs to be part of a cultural diplomacy too

Similarly, it is perfectly possible to encourage students to use English to talk about the cultural differences which separate Britain or America and their own country, and about the issues which are of greatest concern to them. Grant gives a nice example of introducing into a teaching course a discussion of weddings in Nigeria, and specifically the issue of 'bride-price' and 'polygamy'. Here, English is being put at the service of another culture, without that culture being expected to assimilate. We must always be alert to the potential dangers of 'linguistic imperialism'; but at the same time we must not overstate the case, by seeing a hidden political agenda within everything, as authors such as Phillipson seem to suggest.

It is true that the world never freely chose English, and perhaps still does not, in the sense that most people have little choice in the matter. But linguistic imperialism, whatever it may have been by way of cause, is not an inevitable consequence of this state of affairs. One reason for cautious optimism is that language has a tendency to introduce its own checks and balances. The more a language becomes a world language, the less culturally biased it is. This is an inevitable consequence of the reduced level of 'ownership' by any one country. There was a time when Britain 'owned' English. During much of this century, it has been the USA (containing 2 out of 3 mother-tongue speakers). But in the next decade, the number of people who speak English as a mother tongue will be outnumbered by those who speak it as a second language. There may already be more people in China who speak English as a foreign language than exist in the USA. Over a quarter of the world's population is now thought to make some use of English. The British Council estimates that a billion people will be learning English at the turn of the century. Nobody 'owns' English any more. |And, faced with figures which make British English very much a minority dialect of World English, and with even American English somewhat dwarfed, the notion of cultural bias, if it doesn't disappear altogether, certainly becomes very different in character.

We are in a transitional period: the growth of world English, as a present-day reality, has happened so quickly. The arguments which surrounded the issue in the 1970s and 1980s are long out-of-date. Books like Pennycook's and Phillipson's, even though published in the

early 1990s, relate to a global situation which has already largely disappeared. We are now having to deal with a world in which people are more aware of the issues, where new responses are being articulated, and where there is a growing expectation that fresh attitudes will be encountered.

This is a real problem for such organizations as the British Council, which need to replace an uncritical proactivism by a critical reactivism in supporting English, if they are to avoid the charges of 'linguistic capitalism' and 'linguicism' (coined on analogy with 'racism') which have been levelled at them. But it is also an exciting challenge. Pennycook is right when he says, at the end of his book: 'the spread of English, if dealt with critically, may offer chances for cultural renewal and exchange around the world' (325). The spread of English now offers fresh opportunities for everyone. People and institutions in different countries, previously separated by the barrier of language, can through the medium of English now appreciate that they may share common aims. 'If English is the major language through which the forces of neocolonial exploitation operate, it is also the language through which 'common counter-articulations' can perhaps most effectively be made' (326). This is not a scenario to which the Trojan horse metaphor readily applies. Here, English is quite definitely a medium.

And how do we implement all this? For me, this is what a linguistic cultural diplomacy is all about.

## References

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