



Possible Arguments against a Multilingual Policy

(A Reflective Article)

Udaya Narayana Singh

Amity University Haryana, India

Received: May. 16, 2022**Accepted: May 25, 2022****Published: May 31, 2022**

ABSTRACT

In a world that is unearthing more and more benefits of ‘globalization,’ arguments against Plurality or Multilingualism could have an easy run. In this soliloquy, as one who had constantly been arguing in favour of a pluralistic language planning (cf. Singh 1990; 1992), I venture into an exploration as to what could arguments against a multilingual and pluri-cultural policy look like.

Introduction

A close look at EU and UNESCO documents and web-sites show that they shower praise on ‘Multilingual Policy’ being followed in many nation-states. The European Union’s motto, namely, ‘United in Diversity’¹ is based on the belief that many languages are not hindrances in our life as that is what is natural. They argue that “languages unite people, render other countries and their cultures accessible, and strengthen intercultural understanding.” Nancy Hornberger (2002: 27) began with a comment explaining why multilingual policies “open up new world of possibility for oppressed indigenous and immigrant languages and their speakers, transforming former homogenizing and assimilationist policy discourses into discourses about diversity and emancipation.” She began introducing her topic with an opening remark which seems interesting: “The one language – one nation ideology of language policy and national identity is no longer the only available one worldwide (if it ever was).” What I am trying to do

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/multilingualism/about-multilingualism-policy_en

in this paper is to search for possible arguments that would rather have a homogenising tone to tear down the bandwagon of a pluralistic policy planning. To my mind, the following arguments would sum up the possible positions against 'plurality':

- First, we hear that the management of a multilingual space is hugely expensive and messy. For example, what a government could do by working on graded teaching materials in one language would now have to be done for so many languages. Thus, getting the researchers to work on gradation or material developers sensitive to the lexis, sentential patterns, rhyming structure, and imageries associated with particular cultures related to these languages would not be easy. Similarly, one would need to train the teachers who would have to face a multilingual classroom. Decisions on their strategies and actual day-to-day operations at the ground levels will not be easy to handle.
- Secondly, one could argue that a 'Multilingual' is essentially a sum-total of several monolinguals in one person. Thus, if the school system decides to impart instructions to such an individual in one of the many (or several) languages she knows, even if that language is not her mother tongue, it should be fine. After all, her 'multilingual self' will replicate the knowledge in the other languages she knows. Therefore, if the student has a working knowledge of the language or medium of instruction, one could offer instructions in that language. But when an educated native speaker of the language used in education tries and acquires another one or two languages, he may achieve a near-native competence in the other tongues. He may even use those languages as library languages – to read up or gather knowledge. But if he has to 'perform' in those languages academically, he will face stiff competition from those who are mother-tongue speakers of such languages. Grosjean (2008) calls a 'Monolingual bias' is evident in such multilingual learning situations. Here, one assumes that monolingualism is the ideal and default method of human communication (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011).
- Thirdly, where does the 'Ideal' speaker-listener of the Generative Grammar paradigm come from has intrigued almost everybody. In a number of important works during this period that lasted until many other competing theories crowded the space, one often heard of a 'native speaker,' too. The native speaker 'is expected' to have the ideal competence and intuition in the concerned language. Yet, in real life, we all have experiences of so-called native speakers of a speech. They have very little intuition, which becomes evident when asked to make grammatical and acceptability

judgments. It is interesting to see that the whole field of Second Language Acquisition is willing to fall into this trap of Comparative Fallacy – as is warned by BleyVroman (1983). The problem lies in their practice of taking the idealized competence of native speakers as the benchmark for investigating linguistic development in a second (or additional) language. Andisheh Saniei (1911: 74) makes an interesting observation in his essay ‘Who is a native speaker?’ when he says: “...native speakers do not always speak according to the rules of their standard national languages. They display regional, occupational, generational, and social class-related ways of talking that make the notion of an ideal native speaker controversial.” In fact, it is often the case that a so-called non-native speaker teaching a language in a formal setting for a long time is able to help children eliminate all those styles and registers of the target language that display marks of a class or a particular dialectal space. The other condition that goes along with the notion of ideal speaker-listener is a “completely homogenous speech community” which is a fiction any way. In an interesting review of the book *Intonation, Perception, and Language* by Philip Lieberman (1968) in the *Journal of Linguistics*, Vanderslice says that the native command of a language would imply that one has a control of all heterogenous structures of the given language as well.

- Fourthly, the terms ‘Standard’ and ‘Deviations’ in language studies and the idea of accepted speech form all flow from this line of argumentation against Pluralism. As time evolves and as Sociolinguistics gains more maturity, one begins to doubt the grammarian’s myths of ‘Pure’ and ‘Standard’ language. The system had been telling us that monolinguals were pure and multilingual were somewhat deviant. The blame goes to the Tower of Babel because apparently, the Gods in all scriptures are monolingual who speak in a completely unambiguous speech form. All these ambiguities, synonyms, and confusions are a creation of linguistic traditions that continue to borrow from the other tongues constantly. Farah Akbar (2013: 43) makes a very pertinent comment at the end of her paper when she says: “Multilingualism, in and of itself, is no panacea, and is always bounded contextually for the multilingual vis-à-vis their existing, current, and future language experiences and expectations, as well as the functions their language varieties may play in their daily lives.” It is much safer to assume linguistic plurality to be a natural phenomenon.
- Fifthly, there is a belief in the sporting arena that one has to stick to one kind of sport to excel in life as a sportsperson. One cannot dabble in multiple fields at the same time and be good in all. All children are also told by parents as well as by teachers that they must make a choice. They

must not “waste” their talents trying out several things at a time. “Focus” and “not be diffused” are the ideal mottos in many institutions.

- Sixthly, there are questions that are often asked by surveyors of all hues: How can you count ‘one’ and ‘many’ at the same time? Let me elaborate. In an interesting work, Sonal Kulkarni-Joshi and Imtiaz Hussain (2020) comment thus: “With the rise of the nation-state, colonial ideology privileged monolingualism and demonstrated bewilderment towards the linguistic diversity prevailing in other parts of the world ‘as a form of chaos requiring taming through the drive towards classification’ (Bhatti 2015: 4). This is evident from the classification carried out by Grierson, famously known as the *Linguistic Survey of India*.”
- Seventhly, many minority language speaking parents themselves are skeptical, and are at times, even hostile towards the idea of a ‘Public Multilingualism’ (Stephen Mey 2014). This is because many of them believe this to be a well-guarded but misguided international conspiracy to delimit their children in gaining acceptance in the national mainstream. Consequently, the higher positions in life are made more difficult for them to achieve because of the baggage of their mother-tongue education. Any step towards introducing Public Multilingual Policy is construed by them as a planned communal ghettoization for the smaller language speakers. As a result, they are neither going to be effective speakers in the mainstream languages, nor be able to move up the social ladder.
- Eighthly, although with enlightenment spreading from one continent to many did produce an intellectual and political commitment or idea to see that we should move towards a more rationalized and modern world, where freedom and democracy would be guaranteed, what happened in reality did not match with the egalitarian bind. The widespread spurt in automation and industrialization gave rise to the necessity of the political machinery to depend on one of the world languages where all the base materials would be readily available. As Bauman and Briggs (2003: 255) comment, while giving an account of the history of modernity, “Some social scientists came to the conclusion that it was necessary to think beyond the nation-state and actually existing structures of inequality, and cosmopolitan imaginaries were woven into the theoretical foundations laid by a number of influential figures.” There were thinkers such as Rabindranath Tagore who argued in favour of a wider world of ideas, and against the ‘narrow nationalism,’ but the political managers in many of these former colonial nations opted for a mixed approach where mother-tongues and multilingualism would only get the symbolic recognition. In

reality, the effort would be to narrow down the choices as much as one could, without offending any of the linguistic majority groups.

- Ninthly, even the most tiny speech groups have begun to realize now that the main guarantee for their roles in ‘wealth creation’ of any type, the most important keys are whether information and knowledge are possible to store in and retrieve from their own languages.² For the multinational business houses and mass producers, it was thought to be easy and economical to input and store everything that has an intellectual content in a few limited languages because these languages are primary vectors for communicating and disseminating such concepts, tools and techniques. Hence, the use of English as the main carrier of information or content was actively promoted. However, as time went by, it was realized that many such concepts drew from the ontology and thinking patterns that were closely associated with some indigenous languages. Therefore, efforts began to open up the internet space for other languages and other input mechanisms. As ICANN moved towards such inclusive activities, greater number of writing systems (with all their varieties and complexities as well as disagreements among their users) began being studied and standardized in relationship with UNICODE code-maps. There was an enthusiastic participation among all such small groups because they realized that future prospects depended on the extent to which they could participate in emerging knowledge societies. There have, of course, been some who are engaged in reducing the vast linguistic divide that exists in the cyberspace today – purely as a cyber-philanthropist.

References

- Akbar, Farah S. (2013). ‘The case against Monolingual Bias in Multilingualism.’ The Forum: Teachers College, Columbia University Working Papers in TESOL & Applied Linguistics, 13.2: 42-44.
- Bauman, R., & Briggs, C. (2003). *Voices of modernity: Language ideologies and the politics of inequality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bley-Vroman, Robert. (1983). ‘The Comparative Fallacy in Interlanguage Studies: The case of Systematicity.’ *Language Learning (A Journal of Research in Language Studies)* 33.1: 1-17.

² <https://en.unesco.org/themes/linguistic-diversity-and-multilingualism-internet>

- Cantoni, Gina (Ed) (1996). *Stabilizing indigenous languages*. Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University Center for Excellence in Education.
- Cenoz, J., & Gorter, D. (2011). A holistic approach to multilingual education: Introduction. *The Modern Language Journal*, 95(3), 339 – 344.
- Cobarrubias, Juan (1983). Ethical issues in status planning. In Juan Cobarrubias, ed. *Progress in language planning*. Berlin: Mouton; 41-86.
- Grosjean, F. (2008). *Studying bilinguals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hornberger, Nancy H. (2002). 'Multilingual language policies and the continua of biliteracy: An ecological approach.' *Language Policy* 1: 27-51.
- Kulkarni-Joshi, Sonal & Imtiaz Hasnain. (2020) 'Northern perspectives on Language and Society in India,' in Anna Deumert, Anne Storch & Nick Shepherd, eds. *Colonial and Decolonial Linguistics: Knowledge and Epistemes*, Oxford: OUP; 25-45.
- Lieberman, Philip. (1968). *Intonation, Perception, and Language*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Series Monograph, 38.
- May, Stephen. (2014). 'Contesting public multilingualism and diglossia: Rethinking political theory and language policy for a multilingual world,' *Language Policy* 13: 371-94.
- Singh, Udaya Narayana (1990). 'On Language development: the Indian perspective.' In Bahner, Joachim Schildt & Dieter Viehweger, eds. *Proceedings of the 14th International Congress of Linguists*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag. 1460-71.
- (1992). *Language Development and Planning: A Pluralistic Paradigm*. Shimla: IAS and New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Vanderslice, Ralph. (1970). Review of Philip Lieberman (1968) *Intonation, Perception, and Language* in *Journal of Linguistics* 6.1: 138-44.