

Europe's three language problems¹

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Comments welcome

On the 7th of March 2001, the President of the European Commission Romano Prodi, the (then) current Chairman of the European Council and Swedish Prime Minister Goeran Persson, and the (then) future Chairman of the European Council and Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt met hundreds of pupils from three Brussels-based European schools in the canteen of one of these schools. « The wish of these high personalities », the pupils were told in the official announcement, « is to open a debate on the future of Europe among Europe's youth within the framework of a European school. This is why we invite all pupils of all three schools to join us that afternoon with their teachers in order to attend the debate and possibly to take part in it by asking questions. »

Many pupils from the schools' eleven language sections (corresponding to the EU's eleven official languages) queued to ask a question, including a Greek girl, who asked President Prodi about the EU's policy as regards languages. « From its very beginning », Prodi replied in substance, « equality between official languages has been a

¹ This essay is based on lectures given at the University of British Columbia (to a somewhat disturbed audience in the morning of September 11th, 2001), at the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne (16 March 2002), at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (24 April 2003), at Oxford University (1 May 2003), at the University of Siena (6 July 2003), at the Australian National University in Canberra (15 July 2003) and at the Cursos de Verano of the Universidad Complutense in San Lorenzo del Escorial (18 July 2003). It also benefitted greatly from three workshops respectively held at the European University Institute (« Linguistic Diversity and European Law », directed by Bruno De Witte, Florence, 12-13 November 2001), the International Institute for the Sociology of Law ("The public discourse of Law and Politics in Multilingual Societies", directed by Richard Bellamy and Dario Castiglione, Oñati, 5-8 June 2002), and the Hoover Chair of Economic and Social Ethics (« Language Dynamics and Linguistic Justice », with Abram de Swaan, Louvain-la-Neuve, 27 June 2002). I am particularly grateful to Miriam Aziz, Gilles Gantelet, Christian List, Adam Swift, and Michel Vanden Abeele for useful comments and insights.

fundamental principle of the European institutions, and it must remain so ». And the meeting moved on to the next pupil in the queue.²

Now, you may remember that the meeting was taking place in a school canteen, and hence without the interpreting boxes and other equipment that routinely facilitate multilingual exchanges in European institutions. So, how did hundreds of children from fifteen European countries and eleven distinct language sections manage to communicate with their distinguished guests. From the first to the last minute — except for a brief intervention in French by the French commissioner Michel Barnier, who had come along with Romano Prodi — exclusively in English, including to forcefully assert the principle of linguistic equality.

For reasons to be explained below, Prodi was right in both choice of medium and content of message. But the discrepancy between blatant inequality at the level of facts and fundamental equality at the level of declarations nevertheless raises a number of serious questions, three of which can be formulated as issues of fairness. I shall consider each of these in turn, and indicate what I believe is the best way of handling them. But before doing so, let me spell out the nature of the fundamental mechanism that underlies the episode narrated above, and beyond it the core of the dynamics of secondary language learning and multilingual interaction, not only in today's Europe, but throughout history and throughout the world.

1. Why we are moving towards one lingua franca

Most of the trends in linguistic competence we can observe can be understood as the product of the (sometimes explosive) interaction of two micro-mechanisms.

Probability-sensitive learning

What I shall call *probability-sensitive learning* simply captures the following two-dimensional fact. The extent to which a person maintains and improves her linguistic competence in some particular language is strongly affected by the probability with which that person can expect to have to function in that language. This is in the first place a matter of motivation: the more likely it is that competence in a particular language will be useful to

² Based on a witness account by two of my children, and later checked in broad outline with the main actor in the scene.

communication, the greater the effort one is willing to invest in learning it. But this differential learning is also in the second place a matter of opportunity: The more often one finds oneself in a context in which a particular language is actually being used, the smaller the effort required in order to learn it. Moreover, these two dimensions of the mechanism feed into each other: the motivation easily induces the creation of more opportunities than those that offer themselves spontaneously, and the actual enjoyment of the opportunities may nurture the motivation more than the sheer expectation of them by enabling people to experience what difference it makes to possess the linguistic competence required to understand what is being said and to take an active part in the conversation.

I am of course not denying that other factors — for example, how aesthetically attractive one finds the language one considers learning, or how close it is to one's native tongue, or how large a literary corpus it give access to — may affect significantly either the motivation to learn a language or the ease with which one will learn it or both. All I am asserting is that, through these two channels of motivation for learning and opportunity to learn (and retain), the probability of having to interact in a particular language will be a massively important determinant of the extent to which average competence in a particular non-native language tends to expand or shrink in a particular population. A greater probability means both a larger expected benefit from any given level of linguistic proficiency in the language concerned and a lower cost of acquiring or preserving it. More sophisticated measures of the communicative value of a language have been offered, for example Abram de Swaan's (2001) notion of Q-value. But none of them offers the promise of improving much, if at all, upon the simple probability of interaction in that language, as a predictor of differential learning and retention. (See Appendix 1.)

Maximin communication

What I shall call the *maximin law of communication* captures another, somewhat less obvious but hardly less general mechanism, which can be sketched as follows. Suppose you have to address simultaneously a set of people who each know to various extents a number of languages and by all of whom you want to be understood. When deciding which language among those you know you should pick, the question you will spontaneously tend to ask yourself will not be which is your own best language, or which language is the best language of the majority, or which language is best known on average, but rather which language is

best known by the member of your audience who knows it least. In other words, you will systematically tend to ask yourself whether there is any language that is known to some extent by all. If, to the best of your knowledge, there is one and only one, you will choose it. If there is none, you will tend to choose the language which is known to some extent by most. And if there is more than one, you will make a guess for each of them about the level of competence achieved by the person least competent in it, and you will choose the language for which this level of competence is highest.

This “maximin” criterion amounts to maximizing the minimum competence. It can also be described as a criterion of minimal exclusion. It has a number of direct corollaries, such as the systematic victory, in linguistically mixed marriages, of the language of the “worst linguist”, i.e. of the partner who knows least well the language of the other and systematically tends to be the speaker of the more widely spread of the two languages. Prodi’s self-evident choice of language in the canteen of the European school can also easily be interpreted in this light. There were certainly more French natives, probably also more German natives than English natives in the room, and the average knowledge of French was undoubtedly higher than the average knowledge of English. Yet English was unproblematically picked from the start by the multilingual director of the school and his distinguished guests, precisely because it was the maximin language.³

Again, I am not claiming that this maximin law operates without exception. To start with, deviation from it happens on a massive scale for pedagogical reasons. In language classes, for example, teachers often know the mother tongue of their pupils (which may well be their own) far better than the pupils know the language they are learning, but the mutually accepted rules of the teaching game will frequently entail the partial or total banning of the maximin language. For analogous reasons, some people choose (as I did) to speak their mother tongues with their children, even though their children have been all along and they have themselves become significantly more fluent in at least one other shared language,

On a less massive scale but often in a highly sensitive way, deviation may occur, even in informal contexts, for what could be called expressive reasons. This may happen in

³ In September 2002, the three Brussels-based European schools had 26.9 % of their pupils in their French sections, and 17.8% in their English sections. Adding to these figures the proportions of pupils who take French and English, respectively, as their second or third compulsory language, however, yields rough (lower bound) estimates of 92% and 95.5% for the proportions of pupils competent in French and English, respectively, at the end of secondary schools. (Computed on the basis of Michael Ryan, Annual Report of the Secretary-General of the Board of Governors of the European Schools, Brussels, January 2003, sections 2.4.1 and 2.4.2.)

negative fashion, for example when post-1989 East-Europeans struggle to communicate with one another in English, while it would be (linguistically) far easier for them to do so in Russian. It may also happen in positive fashion. For example, it happened to me more than once to address a Brussels audience in Dutch rather than French, despite the fact that all would have understood me adequately in French, while some did not in Dutch. This happened, in one case, because the debate in which I was taking part was hosted by a Flemish cultural centre, and in another because the organisers felt that some fair time sharing between French and Dutch needed to be kept. At least in part for an analogous reason, a vade mecum dispatched by the French foreign ministry insistently instructs France's representatives in all European institutions that, even at informal meetings or after the interpreters have left, "les Français parlent leur langue" (Ministère des affaires étrangères 2002).⁴ Providing the number of mother tongues involved does not exceed two or three, this sort of consideration may also lead one to operate, as often done in interpretation-free federal-level meetings in Belgium, Canada or Switzerland, according to the rule "Each speaks his/her own language".⁵

However, as soon as efficiency in communication prevails over pedagogical or expressive concerns, perceptible inequalities in the minimum knowledge of the various languages involved will generate a hardly resistible pressure for all to adopt the maximin language: What's the point of uttering beautiful sentences with carefully chosen words if my audience would understand me far better were I to express myself more clumsily in a language far more familiar to them. Hence, although didactic effectiveness and symbolic impact may sometimes strongly constrain language choice, this will not prevent the maximin criterion from running the show whenever communication is the prime concern, i.e. in the bulk of spoken and written language use.

⁴ "At least in part", because another reason may be the correct anticipation of the dynamics of maximin and differential learning to be sketched shortly: to prevent French from being ever less often the maximin language (chosen even when no one French is around), one must voluntarily preserve the incentive and opportunity to learn it by using French even when it is not the maximin choice. Not exactly appreciated by those who are thereby forced to listen to a language they do not understand and are therefore left out, nor indeed by those who are thereby forced to speak French and are therefore ignored.

⁵ The unwritten rule may even sometimes be (for example for a time, I am told, at the regular meeting of the European Commissioners' chiefs of cabinet) "Each speaks one of the others' languages", as a supreme expression of respect for the other language, or as a proud display of one's linguistic competence, or both.

An explosive interaction

Needless to say, these two mechanisms powerfully interact with each other. The more a particular language is being learned in some section of the world population, the more likely that language is to be the maximin language in any particular context of interaction among members of that section of the population. And the more often a particular language is picked as the language of interaction, the stronger the motivation for learning it and the more frequent the opportunity to learn it. It is important to note that this positive feedback loop would also exist if the speech partners systematically tended to pick the language for which the average knowledge is greater (call it the maxi-mean language), or even the best language of the majority, but it would then operate at a considerably slower pace.

To illustrate this difference, take the situation that used to prevail before the the Swedes and the Fins joined the EU. Both the maxi-mean and the maximin language in contexts of informal interaction between multilinguals within and around the European institutions then tended to be English and French in varying proportions (with German far more often maximean than maximin). Given how small a percentage of the total population of speech partners they represented, the arrival of the Scandinavians did not change much in terms of maximean. But it made a big difference in terms of maximin. For while the second best language for most British and Irish people was and is French, the Scandinavians' average competence in French was far poorer, and therefore tended to make English a clear winner in terms of maximin (though only marginally better than before in terms of maxi-mean) in any context in which they turned up. It is obviously far easier for a newcomer to upset the prevailing choice of a language under maximin than under maxi-mean: it suffices for her to be about totally ignorant of the prevailing language, while everyone else knows at least some more of at least one of the languages she knows better. And once the switch is done, language learning is accordingly redirected for both incentive and opportunity reasons, leading further contexts to do the switch, and so on.

Undoubtedly, this analysis is very rough. Its basic assumptions need to be qualified and its implications should be modelled out in detail to provide precise answers to questions such as the following: under what conditions does this twofold mechanism lead to a convergence to a single lingua franca? Under what conditions is it on the contrary consistent with the lasting coexistence of two or more binding languages? Under what conditions does it imply the decline of multilingualism (as opposed to bilingualism), and indeed of any bilingualism that

does not consist in combining a mother tongue and the lingua franca? Under what conditions is it consistent with stable universal diglossia — competence of all members of a community in both their mother tongue and the lingua franca — or does it imply a long-term threat to the very survival of linguistic diversity? I do not know the answers to these questions (and would be interested in finding out). But I have been, from the day of my birth, a participant observer in enough thousands of situations of multilingual interaction, and seen enough figures, tables and graphs depicting existing trends, to feel confident about the nature and power of the twofold mechanism outlined above.⁶

2. Why we need one lingua franca

Whatever the power of the mechanism just described, one may want to pause to ask whether we really need the one lingua franca which it tends to bring about. For a start, there is not the slightest doubt in my mind that we need a way of communicating directly and intensively across the borders drawn by the differences of our mother tongues, without the extremely expensive and constraining mediation of competent interpreters. We need it in particular if we do not want Europeanisation, and beyond it globalisation, to be the exclusive preserve of the wealthy and the powerful who can afford quality interpretation. If we want all sorts of workers', women's, young people's, old people's, sick people's, poor people's associations to organise on the ever higher scale required for effective action, we must equip them with the means of talking to one another without interpreting boxes and highly skilled and paid professionals in them. One way of putting this is by saying that we need to meet the linguistic preconditions for turning Europe, and ultimately the world, into one *demos*, without this needing to mean that Europe, or the world, is thereby turned into a single *ethnos*: a forum can be shared thanks to a common language without the culture, including the language, becoming one. It cannot be taken for granted, however, that the linguistic preconditions for the existence of a single *demos* involve the adoption of one lingua franca.

⁶ For some recent data about the spread of English as Europe's sole lingua franca, see Kovacs (2003), based on Herbillon (2003).

Clever softwares?

Firstly, one can try to imagine a situation in which technological development will have made informal communication between different language groups without requiring the learning of a single common language. It suffices to combine the best of voice recognition and translation softwares to convey instantaneously through earphones in any chosen language what is being said in any other. Both kinds of software, we are told, are making fast progress. But those who have experienced some of the oddities generated by translation software even when having to cope with only slightly casual style, and by voice recognition software even under favourable acoustic conditions, can imagine how stilted and contrived a spontaneous interchange would need to become in order for its participants to feel reasonably confident of being understood.

Moreover, any interacting group soon develops a small culture of its own, with words being used between inverted commas, as it were, or proper names turned into nouns, or short-lived imports from another language. Even very imperfect mastery of a common language would provide for a far better medium than beautiful mastery of one's own language constantly threatened by ridiculous stiffness on one side (if one bears the technology in mind) and the risk of ridiculous misunderstandings on the other (if one does not). Techno-freaks can keep dreaming about it. But there is no salvation to be hoped from these quarters in my view.

Esperanto?

If technology does not enable us to dispense with a common language, why not opt for a neutral one? This second solution is less fanciful, but falters against two fatal obstacles. One is that there is no neutral language, no language equidistant from all others. Esperanto, for example, belongs unambiguously to the Western group of Indo-European languages, with identifiable Latin, Slavic and Germanic ingredients. It is true that, unlike English, it would be a learned language for everyone, and hence its adoption as a lingua franca more egalitarian than that of English or French. And as its syntactic and morphological rules are exceptionless, it would be simpler to learn, at least compared with the schoolish learning of natural languages.

However, when proposed on a world scale, or even within Europe with Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian, Basque and Maltese as part of the picture, it cannot make any claim to

“neutrality”. And it has therefore no hope whatever of being sold worldwide on grounds of fairness especially to those, such as the Indians, the Nigerians, the South Africans or even the Chinese and the Japanese, who have already invested massively in the learning of another Western language and will understandably have little patience for this new Eurocentric game which they are enthusiastically invited to join. Moreover, even if some world-wide neutral language had been found, nothing would prevent it, after some generations, from thickening from a lingua franca into the mother tongue of some — as happened to Swahili, for example —, with the consequence that once again neutrality would be lost and the whole process of designing a neutral language in need of being relaunched.

The second obstacle is rooted in the relative vulnerability of an artificial language, precisely as long as it is not the mother tongue of a significant group. Investing in the learning of such a language may be comparatively cheap by virtue of the exceptional simplicity of its morphological and syntactic rules. But as long as speech partners, films, music and TV broadcasts in that language are not all over the place, it still comes at a significant cost for someone with average learning skills. In the case of widespread natural languages, there is a secure minimum return to the learning investment, thanks to the tens or even hundreds of millions of people with whom one can be sure one acquires the capacity to communicate. Even in the case of esperanto, the most widespread among the artificial languages currently advocated, this minimum return is not guaranteed, as all depends on whether a sufficient number of people will be willing to make and keep making the deliberate effort of learning the language, which is itself dependent on which language learning choices they expect others to do.⁷

The size of both these obstacles keeps increasing as English keeps growing in terms of native speakers, mainly thanks to net migration into English-speaking countries, and, at a much faster rate, in terms of the total number of people competent in it: English is probably the only natural language today, and certainly the only major language, with (far) less native speakers than people who learned it as a second language.⁸ Given the twofold mechanism sketched at the start, to dislodge it from this position will become an ever more impossible task. Esperanto is a wonderful way of connecting with a lovely bunch of generous and

⁷ See Selten & Pool (1991)..

⁸ Hebrew may provide a second case, but to a fast decreasing extent, whereas for English the gap keeps increasing. ,

hospitable people around the world, but it is no more hopeful than clever software as an alternative world-wide medium of communication.

Lingua franca pluralism?

Having granted that we need a natural language, perhaps we should not rush into asserting that we need only one. To avoid the drawbacks and dangers of the dominance of a single language, many (especially, but not exclusively, among those whose language would be picked as one of the lingua francas in the event that the proposed formula were implemented) have proposed that there should be two or three lingua francas side by side, with an identical status.⁹

Reflection on a very modest arithmetic exercise should suffice to discard this idea too. Just take two British people, two French and two Germans, and compare the following three options (see details in Appendix 2):

- (1) Let them choose their second language at random.
- (2) Constrain the choice of a second language by imposing that it should always be English or French.
- (3) Impose English to the French and the Germans, while the Brits learn nothing..

In case (1), the six people will always have a common language when 2 of them meet; in 60% of the cases when 3 meet; in 25% of the cases when 4 meet; and never when more than 4 meet.

In case (2), the percentage of cases in which they have a common language rises from 60 to 80% when 3 of them meet, from 25 to 66% when 4 of them meet, and from 0 to 33% when 5 of them meet. It remains 0 when all of them meet.

In case (3), the percentage of cases in which there is a common languages rises sharply from 80%, 66%, 33% and 0% to 100% when they meet in groups of 3, 4, 5 or 6. Moreover, this is

⁹ See for example the recent English-French-German proposal by Michel Herbillon (member of France's Assemblée nationale) reported by Kovacs (2003). In this proposal, the natives of the three privileged languages would be allowed to speak their own language, In other variants, they would not: see e.g. Chaudenson (2001: 152), Ammon (2001: 73), and the proposal by the Danny Pieters also reported by Kovacs (2003). .

achieved with a one-third global discount on the learning bill, since the Brits need to do none of the learning

As the number of mother tongues involved increases, it is not difficult to understand that convergence on a single lingua franca remains just as effective at facilitating inter-communication for groups of any size (only the size of the discount diminishes as lingua franca natives shrink as a proportion of the total population involved), whereas a balanced choice between two lingua francas becomes ever less effective: as from four mother tongues, even two-by-two meetings are no longer guaranteed to find a common language. This simple example illustrates how little sense it would make on efficiency grounds to resist convergence to a single lingua franca in favour of a coexistence of two or more. At the same time, such a coexistence is also very hard to justify consistently on grounds of justice, as the greater comfort gained for natives of the language thereby granted the privilege of sharing the lingua franca status would be bought at the cost of further disadvantages, in the form of greater effort or more frequent exclusion, for the natives of languages not granted this status.

3. Unfairness as unequal access to linguistic advantage

The twofold mechanism sketched in section 1 and the feedback loop between its two components enable us to understand what leads to the canteen episode. No hidden plot by the Brits, let alone the Americans — indeed no British or American national plays a prominent part in the episode —, but the spontaneous outcome of a huge set of decentralised decisions, mainly by non-anglophones, about which language to learn and which language to use. Next, our quick exploration of imaginable alternatives in section 2 led to the conclusion that the increasing dominance of one natural language as the single lingua franca makes a lot of sense: to communicate with one another, we need one and only one idiom, and it will need to be a natural language. Nonetheless, the contrast between the actual outcome — a massive privilege ascribed to a single language — and the public assertion of equality among all languages can understandably be found disturbing, indeed shocking, by some. Is there some fundamental injustice reflected in the canteen episode? I shall examine in succession three possible characterisations of the nature of the injustice involved and indicate in each case how best to respond to the problem, as characterised.

Undeserved linguistic rents

First, convergence towards a lingua franca that is the mother tongue of a subset of the population concerned unavoidably provides the members of this subset with undeserved advantages over the rest. They can express themselves with more ease and therefore tend to be more active and more persuasive in discussions conducted in the lingua franca, whether of a business, political or civil nature. In addition, some jobs restricted to native speakers of the lingua franca — such as a far more than proportional number of language teachers and language editors paid for by non-natives, a more than proportional number of translators and interpreters into that language paid for by international organisations — would not exist without the privileged status enjoyed by that language. Moreover, a large number of jobs that are not specifically linguistic in content are explicitly or implicitly restricted, or far more easily accessible, to native speakers of that language, because of the central importance of being able to communicate in that language.¹⁰ This booming demand for people proficient in the lingua franca unavoidably tends to boost the relative pay of people with native competence in that language, whether, for example, through being able to ask for high fees for private language tuition or through faster promotion in inter- or supranational organisations.

The undeserved inequalities thus created are by no means restricted to inequalities between natives and non-natives of the lingua franca. Among non-natives, there are also huge social inequalities in terms of the extent to which the family environment provides children and adolescents with both the opportunity and the motivation to learn the lingua franca. There

¹⁰ The esperantist organisation is particularly active in documenting linguistic discrimination in favour of English native speakers. They have collected a huge sample of job advertisements of the following sort: The International Institute for Drug Development "is seeking, for Brussels, Administrative Assistant English mother tongue," Bulletin 29/03/01. "Council of Europe Vacancy Notice n^o 37/2001 Ö competitive examination for the recruitment of English mother tongue assistants Ö Candidates must be nationals of a Council of Europe member state Ö Languages: English mother tongue; also good knowledge of French; knowledge of other European languages useful..." www.coe.fr/jobs/AV/a37, 1/06/01. "Are you an expat secretary having lived in Belgium for less than one year? Are you English mother tongue? Are you a national of a NATO country? This international body is hiring a Secretary to assist in the daily running of the Political Committee ... Very good knowledge of Microsoft Office and good French are prerequisites. Excel Careers." Bulletin 22/03/01. "Audiovisual Eureka is recruiting a Secretary/Assistant ... This position requires a person with English mother tongue, fluency in French (other European languages an asset) Audiovisual Eureka is a pan-European intergovernmental organisation with 35 member countries, the European Commission and the Council of Europe being associated members." Bulletin 22/03/01. "UGAL, the Union of independent retail traders' groups in Europe ... is currently in search of a Jurist ... Trained as a lawyer, you have a specialization in European law. You are English native speaker and fluent in French. Knowledge of the German language is an asset. Career Consult" Bulletin 8/03/01. "European Association of Co-operative Banks is looking for an English mother tongue Junior Adviser." European Voice 1/03/01. And hundreds more...

is a big difference between children whose parents have both a rich set of foreign connections with whom the lingua franca is commonly spoken and a purse large enough to fund a Summer course in Cambridge, and those who have never taken part in any English conversation and would not know how to start to give their kids the chance of however modest an immersion.

Stepping back

Thus, growing unfairness there appears to be. Before considering what can and must be done about it, it is worth pausing briefly to get a sense of perspective.

First, the problem thus characterised is far from being unprecedented. In most nation states, the majority of the population had a mother tongue, usually labelled a “dialect”, that differed notably from the national language, as used in the media and the educational system, in high culture and political life, and in business transactions beyond the local level. Indeed, in many places, there is still a big discrepancy between the home language of many families, especially rural ones, and the nationally imposed lingua franca. In most cases, linguistic distance was not as great as between most European languages and English, but in some cases it was, and in all cases it involved forms of disadvantage in economic and political life, often even forms of blatant discrimination, closely parallel to those now encountered as English becomes just as much of a trans-national must as the dialect of the capital was a national must.

In the national context, the task of drastically reducing the resulting inequality of opportunities was (regarded as) accomplished through compulsory schooling in the national language. In the case of a lingua franca that no one would dare to try to impose as the main language of the population concerned, the job looks far trickier. But let’s bear in mind that the average number of years spent at school and the resources devoted to education in today’s European context are huge in both a historical and a comparative perspective. For example, when we are demanding that a country like the Congo, whose formal political life is conducted in an alien language mastered by no more than an estimated 7% of the population, should operate democratically, and hence at the very least enable a majority of the citizens to more or less follow what is going on, we are demanding something far more utopian, in terms of its linguistic preconditions, than universal competence in English in non-anglophone industrialised countries.

Moreover, when you look at recent statistics, the process is well under way. In Belgium, for example, in which there are two national languages on the same footing, average competence in English for the younger cohorts of adults is considerably higher than average competence in the second national language has ever been in the history of the country (see Appendix 3). It is true, however, that even in these younger cohorts it remains a minority feature, and no doubt on average still a very long distance from the competence of native speakers. But there is one simple and cheap measure which, if taken vigorously throughout Europe can be expected to have a dramatic impact both in reducing this distance and in spreading competence in English in all layers of the population.

Ban dubbing!

To see what this could be, just reflect for a while on the distribution of competence in English across European countries, as revealed by Eurobarometer (see Appendix 4). If we leave out the UK and Ireland because they are essentially anglophone, and Belgium and Luxemburg because they are multilingual, we are left with eleven countries, five with a Germanic language, four with a Latin language and two others. Without surprise, the five Germanic countries score better in terms of self-assessed knowledge of English (with an unweighted average of 65%), than the four Latin countries (with an unweighted average of 38%). This seems to provide strong support to the common wisdom that this sizeable inequality is rooted in the fact that English is an (admittedly somewhat latinised) Germanic language, and hence intrinsically easier to learn for the average citizen of the former set of countries than for the average citizen of the latter.

There is however, a second conjecture that turns out to be far more consistent with the data as soon as some attention is paid to the two remaining countries. Greek and even more Finnish are uncontroversially far more remote from English than either the Latin or the Germanic languages. As one moves from Finnish to Greek and next to the Latin and the Germanic group, one would therefore expect competence in English to rise monotonically. Yet for the population as a whole, the profile the data yield is 61% for Finland, 47% for Greece, 38% for the average Latin country and 65% for the average Germanic country. Even worse, for the younger generation (under 40), we find 87% for Finland, 71% for Greece, 61.5% for the average Latin country and 79.5% for the average Germanic country. On closer

inspection, therefore, linguistic distance looks like a very bad — and worsening — predictor of competence in English.

To find a better predictor, let us partition our eleven countries according to the number of native speakers of their official language worldwide: less than 10 million (Denmark, Finland, Sweden), between 10 and 50 million (Greece, the Netherlands), between 50 and 100 million (Italy, France, Germany, Austria) and over 100 million (Portugal, Spain). The average proportion of people who say they know English now drops quite sharply and consistently from one category to the next: 72%, 58.5%, 45% and 35.5%, respectively, for all age groups together; 88%, 75.5%, 66.5% and 60%, respectively, for the under 40. Why?

My conjecture is that the key intermediate variable is the relative frequency of dubbing versus subtitling in the broadcasting of English-language series, films and other programmes. It is estimated that the average cost of one hour of dubbing is about fifteen times the cost of subtitling (Luyken & al. 1991). Hence, the threshold, in terms of number of viewers, as from which it starts making sense to incur the cost of translation is far higher in the case of dubbing, which a majority of viewers seems to prefer,¹¹ than in the case of subtitling. Consequently, the extent to which English-language productions are dubbed, rather than subtitled, can safely be expected to rise steadily as one moves from countries whose language is spoken by comparatively few people, such as Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Greece and the Netherlands, to countries populated by the members of larger linguistic groups.¹² As revealed by incipient research, the watching of undubbed foreign programmes can, under appropriate conditions, be a powerful way in which children learn foreign languages.¹³ No wonder, therefore, that we should find a strong negative correlation between size of the language group and competence in English.

In order to motivate the proposal I am about to make, I do not need to assert that no other factor plays a significant role. It is sufficient for me to be able to assume, as the

¹¹According to Eurobarometer (2002), 29.8 % of the European population say they prefer subtitling, and 59.6% that they do not. (Had the question been phrased the other way around, the difference would no doubt have looked less striking.) As pointed out by Kooistra and Beentjes (1999), however, these preferences correlate strongly and positively with prevailing practices in the country, which suggests that preferences tend to adjust.

¹² It has been estimated that Dutch children spend about half their TV time watching programmes with English-language sound (Koolstra & Beentjes p.16).

¹³ See, especially, van de Poel & d'Ydewalle (1996) and Kooistra & Beentjes (1999) for some experimental evidence on learning English through watching subtitled programmes. Chaudenson (2001: 145, 155-6) also mentions the competence in Italian acquired by Tunisian and Albanian children with no other exposure to it than the watching of Italian TV channels. (I am told that once a TV exploded in Tunis and the kids rushed out screaming "Aiuto!").

available evidence strongly suggests I can, that the learning mechanism in question is powerful enough. We cannot do much about linguistic distance between languages, nor about the numbers of native speakers of the various languages, nor therefore about the relative profitability of subtitling and dubbing. But we can outlaw dubbing. And if we do so, while providing supportive language teaching and letting MTV music, web chats and other less virtual trans-national contacts do the rest of the job, competence in English will become all over, in the space of one generation, even less of a problem than it now is in the most English-literate parts of the European continent.

Refusing to ban dubbing in those countries in which it is currently common practice amounts to unnecessarily inflicting a linguistic handicap to the most disadvantaged layers of the populations concerned and therefore strengthening the privilege enjoyed by the elite layers whose access to competence in English is far easier through quality schooling and foreign contacts. It also amounts to perpetuating an increasingly costly disadvantage for all those members of their population who are any likely to be involved in the global economy, in supra-national organisations or in the trans-national civil society. If we want to be serious about fighting linguistic injustice in the sense of unequal access to linguistic advantage, therefore, my recipe is simple and inexpensive: *Ban dubbing!*¹⁴

Three objections

I have heard or can anticipate three main objections to this recipe. First, such a ban would violate the fundamental freedom of expression. Since the ban, which applies indiscriminately to all languages, in no way affects the content of what is being subtitled or dubbed, this objection is bound to sound ludicrously formalistic if the ban it incriminates can persuasively be shown, along the lines sketched above, to better equip a large proportion of

¹⁴ I am clearly not the only one to have realised the handicapping effects of dubbing. At European level, for example, the EU's Council of Ministers, in 1990, decided to promote indiscriminately dubbing, subtitling and multilingual broadcasting as a way of overcoming the "language barrier" (Luyken 1991: 208), but a more recent document, drafted by the European Commission's DG Education and Culture in connection with a consultation on linguistic diversity, contains the following passage: « In some member states, TV programmes and films in foreign languages seldom get onto our screens, or if they do they are often dubbed rather than subtitled because the local market prefers dubbing; yet research shows that films and TV can encourage and facilitate language learning if they are made available in their original language, with subtitles instead of dubbing ; subtitling provides an economical and effective way of making our environment more language-friendly. » (European Commission 2002: 16). Similarly, in the debate about the learning language in the Parliament of Belgium's Francophone Community, one deputy briefly suggested: "I shall content myself with one proposal, simple but far more important than one might think at first sight: abolishing the dubbing of spoken texts at the radio, the TV and the cinema." (Henry 2003: section 2).

the population to express themselves in a language in which it will be increasingly crucial for them to be able to express themselves for them to be heard by those by whom they will need to be heard.

Secondly, there is the argument that it hurts head on the interests of the actor profession, who uses dubbing as a way of securing a more regular income that film or theatre contracts can provide. There will undoubtedly be an effect of this kind, but it will be buffered, if not offset, by some increase in the demand for local production if it remains the case that more people prefer dubbing to subtitling. If there remain nonetheless a net negative effect on the profession, the vested interest of a small minority can of course not legitimately block a move that would massively benefit a large, comparatively disadvantaged majority.

Finally, there is the risk that the ban would be by-passed as a result of people going to the cinema or watching videos and DVDs not subjected to the same ban. While the ban seems easy enough to extend to cinemas, it seems more difficult for videos and DVDs. But the fall in demand from TV channels and cinema distribution may in itself be sufficient to make quality dubbing unprofitable for videos and DVDs alone, even if some boosting of the demand for dubbed videos is triggered by the ban. Needless to say, if the effect of the ban were that people would shift entirely to programmes in the native language, or to cartoons with a sound track in the native language, or to dubbed videos, or to a combination of these, the intended effect would not be achieved. But although some shift in each of these three directions can be expected, it is most doubtful that it would inhibit a lasting and expanding impact, especially as tolerance for subtitling develops through practice and as teletext technology makes it possible to open a wide range of individual choices for subtitle languages and to optionally get rid of subtitling altogether as competence in English makes it superfluous for a growing number of non-native people for a widening range of programmes.

4. Unfairness as the unequal sharing of the burden of language learning

Free riding

To phrase as sharply as possible our second problem of linguistic injustice, let us next assume that competence in English has spread massively to the non-native speakers, and pretty equally among them, so that the adoption of English as a lingua franca no longer gives

a great advantage in discussion or competition to English natives or to non-natives with a privileged access to English. Language-related injustice has not disappeared. For unlike the community of natives, the non-natives have had to spend a considerable amount of time and resources to the learning of a foreign language. It is estimated that the average time required to master adequately a foreign language is 10.000 hours — compared to a standard school year totalling less than 1.000 hours in the class room.¹⁵ However speculative such estimates, it is clear that the cost in time and resources of acquiring proficiency in a foreign language is huge. This huge effort obviously benefits the community that performs it — otherwise it would not bother —, but also, in some cases possibly even more, the community whose language is being learned. This benefit takes the form of jobs for its members, as mentioned before, but also of outlets for its publications and electronic products, and above all of the fantastic convenience of being able to use one's mother tongue when conducting business, giving talks, or making reservations in an ever growing number of locations throughout the world.

In brief, there is a public good— the creation of a lingua franca — being enjoyed by all linguistic groups throughout the world involved in global communication, but produced only by those groups whose language has not been picked as the lingua franca, with the lucky ones whose native language happens to have been picked enjoying a free ride. This is the second sense in which “linguistic injustice” can be said to be involved. What can be done about it?

Cost sharing

Scandinavians, who speak the least widely spread of the EU's current eleven official languages have tended to be pretty blunt about admitting the dominance of English, while being quite imaginative about suggesting how the induced fairness could be reduced. Thus, the first Danish delegation to the European Parliament is said to have made the following proposal. They conceded upfront that they could not expect others to understand Danish and agreed to speak English, but only on condition that the others, including the French, did the

¹⁵ See Piron (2001: 95). Admittedly, this sort of estimate is fairly arbitrary, in part because the notion of “mastering” a foreign language is pretty fuzzy, and once the basic syntax and morphology are learned, hundreds of hours may be needed for tiny improvements in pronunciation, fluency, use of idiomatic expressions and respect of grammatical exceptions; in part because the number of hours required for any given level of competence is massively dependent on linguistic distance between the mother tongue (and other languages previously learned) and the language to be learned. The “average” time needed is therefore crucially dependent on the way in which the various two-by-two combinations are weighted — a rather tricky matter, both conceptually and empirically.

same with the sole exception of the British, who would have to speak French. The British were no doubt quick to point out that this would be grossly unfair to them as they would be forced to express themselves in a language only a minority would grasp, while everyone else could be understood by all. As they were still allowed to speak in English, the others must have understood they had a point, and the idea was dropped.¹⁶

More recently, the Swedish Prime Minister, somewhat scared at the prospect of a near doubling of the number of official languages, made a distinct proposal. Instead of having all countries paying jointly (roughly according to their wealth) for the translating services, why not have a system in which the cost of language services would be systematically shared equally between the countries whose language is being used and the countries into whose language the translation is being made. As an ever greater majority of texts is being produced in English and as the Swedes are competent enough in English not to need a translation for many documents, the rule would end up practically exempting the Swedes from any contribution. Fairly, it might be said, as this counts as a compensation for their investment in the learning of English. Efficiently too, it may be added, as this would provide other countries with an incentive to follow suit, thereby facilitating massive savings in translation costs. At the limit, all translation costs would be eliminated as a result of all countries conforming to the Swedish pattern. However, while translation costs may then be down to zero, unfairness would not, as one linguistic community would get away with not learning a foreign language, while all others would need to.

Proportionality between cost and benefit

As argued persuasively by Jonathan Pool (1991), the only real solution to the problem, the only real way of reconciling efficiency and equity in this domain, consists in introducing a subsidy from the linguistic group whose language is being learned to those who do the learning. How high should this subsidy be? Various criteria are worth discussing. For example, Pool (1991) proposes that each language group should contribute to the cost of the learning of the lingua franca according to its size, while David Gauthier's (1986) general criterion of maximin relative benefit would require each language group to derive from the

¹⁶ As I have heard this story in several versions, I would not bet on its accuracy. See e.g. Ammon (2001b: 73). In the same vein, see the multiple-lingua-franca proposals mentioned in an earlier note, which, whether fair or unfair, all raise face the decisive difficulty of this multiplicity.

existence of the lingua franca the same net benefit per capita (i.e. the difference between the average benefit derived from the existence of the lingua franca and the average contribution to the cost of its learning).

I argue elsewhere (Van Parijs 2002) that neither of these *prima facie* attractive criteria is defensible, and that the most appealing criterion requires the equalisation of cost-benefit ratios across linguistic groups, or proportionality between contribution to the cost of the existence of the lingua franca and benefit derived from it. In all circumstances, this criterion will require a net transfer from the linguistic group whose language is being learned to the learning groups, and the per capita size of this language tax will grow, other things being equal, as more and more people learn the language. The size of the transfer will never exceed the benefit, as the criterion requires the ratio of cost to benefit to be the same for all, and the learning only makes sense if the cost exceeds the benefit. Nonetheless, it should be clear that such a criterion of fair burden sharing would require massive transfers from the countries in which the bulk of the English natives live to the rest of the world.

Four qualifications

This conclusion needs to be qualified in four ways. Firstly, as the biggest language groups in the world — the Mandarinophones and the Hispanophones — fully join the global game, the English natives will not be the only ones from whom fairness will require a contribution. To understand why, it is crucial to see that, as one moves from a larger to smaller language group that learns the lingua franca, it is not just that the total amount of the subsidy justified by our criterion shrinks, but also its per capita level. So much so that for small linguistic groups this subsidy may be negative, as the benefit they derive from the existence of the lingua franca — roughly, the number of people they are thereby enabled to communicate with — is far greater than for members of much larger groups. Overall equality of cost-benefit ratios may therefore require small learners to subsidise big learners, say the Danes, the Dutch and even the French to help the British and the North Americans pay for part of the learning of English by the Chinese.¹⁷

Secondly, as English spreads as a world lingua franca, the quantity of learning may be rising, but its per-unit cost is bound to fall at some point for two reasons. One is that there are

¹⁷ See de Briey & Van Parijs (2002) for a generalisation to n language groups of the criterion proposed and defended in Van Parijs (2002) in the case of just two.

more and more opportunities to speak English as the number of (non-native) English speech partners expands, and providing more costless opportunities to speak is the surest way of cheapening language learning. The second reason is that the local spread of competence in English makes it possible to provide prospective learners far more cheaply with the competent teachers they need — it is no longer necessary to import natives at high cost or to send children to immersion courses in native territory. For this reason the swelling of the global cost of lingua franca learning is bound to be far less than proportional to the swelling of its quantity. Moreover, the native lingua franca countries may plausibly argue that the cost they can be expected to share is not the actual cost, but the cost of using the cheapest effective method. If some countries deliberately fail to use such inexpensive and powerful tools as the ban on dubbing advocated earlier, they cannot expect other countries to foot a portion of the resulting extra bill.

Thirdly, one has to draw the full implications of the fact that talking to some willing native speakers of a language in a context in which it is natural to speak that language is one of the most widespread and most effective ways of improving one's knowledge of a language — this is precisely the opportunity side of the probability-sensitive learning mechanism at the core of the language dynamics sketched in section 1. But it is its reverse side which I now want to draw attention to. As competence in English spreads worldwide, there are ever less circumstances, because of the maximin dynamics sketched earlier, in which English natives will have a natural opportunity to speak another language and improve their knowledge of it. The advantage of being able to use one's own language in an ever growing number of contexts therefore has the side effect of making it increasingly difficult to learn other languages. Even though the importance of knowing other languages for communication purposes decreases accordingly, this is a genuine disadvantage. One way of putting it is that language learning is to a large extent made up of free riding on patient speech partners. As English spreads, interaction between English natives and others happens more and more, soon nearly exclusively in English. Consequently, this type of free-riding of English natives on others will get reduced to very little, relative to the symmetric free-riding of these others on English natives (even though an ever growing majority of the people non-English natives will be talking English to will be other non-English natives).¹⁸ This growing asymmetry in learning-

¹⁸ How many times is it happening that some nice Americans or Brits (not of the “If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it is good enough for them” type), after managing some painstaking but much appreciated

help may be far from offsetting the growing asymmetry in learning-exemption, but it does qualify the assessment of the size of the unfairness involved.

Poach the web!

Finally, there is the significant fact that English will become more and more a globally public language, while other languages will remain or increasingly become globally private languages, since the incentive to learn any foreign language but English will decrease as English increasingly suffices to get by wherever one is. Having no private language means being far more liable to give away information to any outsider who cares to listen or read. This may take some minor forms: whatever your mother tongue, you may benefit from overhearing two American tourists telling each other, in the queue to the museum, that the door to the toilet is locked (which saved you losing your place in the queue to no avail). Had they been Finnish, good luck to you (unless you happen to be Finnish). Trivial asymmetric benefiting of this sort may seem hardly worth mentioning. But as more and more information gets loaded onto the web, easy to access worldwide, to copy and to use, this asymmetry is taking gigantic proportions. Whatever is being made available in this way to the 350 million English natives is being made available simultaneously to the 700 million or so non-natives who bothered to learn English (and are massively over-represented among web users of their respective countries). By contrast, practically nothing of the information that these 700 million put on the web in their native languages can be “overheard” by English natives, because so few of these know other languages. Of course, more and more of the material put on the web by non-English natives will be in English (not only, nor even mainly, to communicate with English natives). But as long as a significant proportion is produced and made available in other languages,¹⁹ a deep asymmetry remains, which, again, partly cancels the advantage derived from one’s language having become the lingua franca. Indeed, it provides the only realistic chance of ever cancelling that advantage to a significant extent. Let me explain.

My point of departure was that the unfairness deriving from the massive advantage enjoyed by English natives as a result of their language having been picked as the lingua

sentences in the local language, are rewarded with a “Now, let’s get down to business” in an English so competent that carrying on in the local language would be felt to be pointless masochism.

¹⁹ Nunberg (2002: 322-24) provides persuasive evidence to the effect that the share of web contents in languages other than English keeps increasing and will keep doing so.

franca had to be corrected through a fair sharing of the burden of producing the public good, i.e. of the learning of the lingua franca by those with a distinct mother tongue. But it is hard to imagine the US and the UK gathering huge amounts of cash to compensate countries whose populations spontaneously crave to learn English anyway, and do so. But it is not exactly crazy to believe that the web can be massively poached, i.e. taken advantage of without a compensatory payment. The difficulty of protecting property rights effectively on the web means that poaching, tolerated or not, will take ever growing proportions. In actual practice, by far the most effective (though selective) lock may well be language — for those who do not understand it. But as English spreads, all English material gets unlocked for the world, and poaching becomes increasingly asymmetric. No vigorous efforts should be made to repress it, to enforce intellectual property rights over English-language contents accessible in this way — or indeed in (increasingly obsolete) printed form. No collaboration can be legitimately expected for the sake of redressing the massive resulting (net) free riding by the non-English natives. For this is nothing but compensatory free riding. My slogan-like response to linguistic unfairness in the second sense is therefore as simple as my response to unfairness in the first sense: *Poach the web!*

5. Interlude: Ideological domination.

Americanization

Suppose ‘Ban dubbing!’ works as a way of equalising language-based inequalities, and suppose “Poach the web!” works as a way of offsetting the unequal distribution of language-learning burdens. The outcome will undoubtedly be an acceleration of the very process to which these two strategies are meant to respond: as the consumption of undubbed TV programmes and the use of English-language websites expand, competence in English keeps increasing, but also, as a by-product, the absorption of intellectual products conceived and produced in English-speaking countries, above all the United States. This is the case not only directly because ever more is heard or read directly in English by non-English natives relative to what is heard or read by English natives in languages other than English. This primary bias is further amplified by a derived bias in the flow of translations: far more is being translated from English into other languages than from other languages into English, and for any given language, an ever greater proportion of what is produced in English is translated into it than of what is produced in any other language. Not that surprising when you think about it: the very

spread of competence in English among those who have to make decisions about what to adapt or translate gives a far greater chance of discovery and translation, for a given quality and interest, to anything that is available in English. And once the process is on the way, marketing strategies focusing on known names will further amplify the process.²⁰ Might this not lead, as feared by many, to a worrying world-wide ideological domination by the anglophone countries?²¹

Let us first clear a confusion. Whatever you may hear said in English, there is of course nothing intrinsically “pro-capitalist”, or “anti-poor”, or “market-imperialist” about the English language, just as it is not because Marx wrote in German that there is something intrinsically “anti-capitalist” or “pro-proletarian” or “state-fetishist” about the German language. Like all other languages in the world, English and German have the means of expressing negation, so that whatever Marx wrote in German you can also deny in German and whatever Bush said in English you can also deny in English. Similarly, contrary to what is occasionally asserted, there is nothing intrinsic to English that makes it more suitable for expressing things rigorously and succinctly. (Mathematical economics, let us remember, was born in French, and analytic philosophy in German.) Which is not to say that there are no distinct national intellectual traditions, shaped by educational practices and cultural fashions, nor therefore significant statistical differences between average levels of rigour or long-windedness in speeches and writings in the various languages.

Attack, the best defence

Hence, the real problem is not the use of English as such, but rather the fact that the political content of English-language discourse, as reflected for example in academic textbooks, newspaper articles, TV series and web contents, tends to differ in ways many regard as undesirable from what the discourse would be in non-anglophone countries if these were sheltered from anglophone influence. What “makes sense” in terms of public policy in the United States is strongly shaped by the heavy dependence of political candidates at the highest levels on the collection of private contributions to the funding of their electoral campaigns. As a result of the worldwide spread of competence in English, this situation unnecessarily restricts the realm of the politically thinkable and feasible, not just in the U.S.

²⁰ See Melitz 1999 for some data.

²¹ See e.g. Wilmet (2003).

but throughout the world. For this contingent reason, not because of any intrinsic feature of the English language, there is a real danger of “Americanisation” that the ban on dubbing and the poaching of the web, as such, would admittedly rather reinforce than contain.

The solution, however, cannot consist in a defensive retreat. It rather consists in appropriating that medium in order to spread through it whatever content we see fit. Throughout the world we must become able to say: “English is our language, even when it is, as for many of us, only one of our languages. And we shall jolly well use it to say what we want to say in it, and not what the government of the country that houses most of its native speakers would like us to say.” But to make this strategy effective, the worst would be to hold back and obstruct in all sorts of ways the learning of English by our people, our students, our children, especially the less advantaged among them. They should rather acquire as soon as possible the competence needed to talk and write in English, indeed to feed the web with English material and produce English-language works. If people from all over the world want to be read or heard all over the world they must not proudly or shyly withdraw into their small linguistic world but use the language that will enable them to reach as many as possible. If ideological domination is to be avoided, the way forward, therefore, does not consist in resisting, but in accelerating the competent appropriation of the lingua franca. All the better, therefore, if the ban on dubbing and the poaching of the web takes us faster in that direction.

6. Unfairness as unequal respect

There is, however, a distinct objection which is sometimes confused with the risk of ideological domination. Conceding, indeed accelerating, the de facto prevalence of one language over all others can be perceived as showing a lack of respect towards these other languages and the people whose identities are closely tied to them. Even if second-language competence is widely and thoroughly spread, even if the burden of learning the lingua franca as a second language is fairly shared by the people who have the lingua franca as their mother tongue, there remains the fact that the language of one subset is being given a privileged status above all the others. The most fundamental injustice, the form of injustice that is hardest to fix may well turn out to be this inequality of respect, of honour, of pride. What can be done about it?

Demystification

There need not be anything obnoxious, or ridiculous, or insulting for others, in taking pride in one's mother tongue having been picked as a world's lingua franca — not more, at any rate, than in being proud about the fact that a boy from one's village has been picked as a page to the King. It may nonetheless be wise to reassert now and then that the choice was not based on any intrinsic quality. English is just the dialect of some Germanic Barbarians who settled across the Channel, messily bastardised as a result of subsequent French colonisation and gradually enriched, through the centuries, from the top down by sophisticated scholars shamelessly plundering the Latin and Greek lexicons and from the bottom up through the reluctant incorporation into grammar books and dictionaries of the unspeakable slang of defiant youth. It may also be of some use to reiterate, when an opportunity arises, that the choice is not rooted either in any ethnic superiority of its native population — by now anyway a pretty mixed bunch of people which owes its large size far (and ever) less to the reproductive drive of the Angles than to the assimilating power of the US educational machine.

Ritual affirmation

All this may be worth rehearsing whenever arrogance gets out of control, but equal respect can hardly be expected to be achieved as a result. More significant is the ritual, sometimes ceremonial, affirmation of the equality of all recognised languages. However incongruous with the actual language regime of the event, Romano Prodi was right in replying to the Greek pupil that the EU regarded all official EU languages as equal. The authors of the Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000) were also right in stating, in its article 22, that “the Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity”. And so was Valéry Giscard d'Estaing when he opened the European Convention in February 2002 by saying “Mesdames et Messieurs” in the EU's eleven official languages, just as it has great significance for the language groups concerned that the Pope should mumble publicly a brief Happy New Year in their own language, however modest the latter's range.²² However, the lip service thus ceremoniously paid to linguistic equality has obvious limits, not

²² By contrast, there was something incongruous and, if not offensive, at least insensitive when in April 2002 the European Commission's DG Environment advertised its “Green Week” through a huge construction conspicuously positioned in the middle of Brussels' Rond Point Schuman with everything written in English only.

only because of its growing awkwardness as the number of official languages increases from the initial four (in the first two decades of the “European community”) to the prospective 21 after 2004. The number of cases in which oral and written communication will be allowed to transgress the equality rule will keep increasing. More fundamentally, if equality of respect boils down to ceremony, it is hard to dispel the suspicion of hypocrisy.

The territoriality principle

In addition to demystification and ceremonial affirmation, however, there is a third, and in my view far more significant way of expressing equality of respect for the various languages concerned. It consists in allowing each of them to be “the King” in some part, large or small, of the EU’s territory, thereby making its own survival secure and giving a privilege, within the limits of that territory, to the people who have as a mother tongue the language to which that territory has been ascribed. The message from the EU to its citizens is then simply: “Free movement within the European Union is one of our great achievements. But if you move for more than a short time to any part of the EU’s territory whose official language happens to be different from your mother tongue, you must have the courage *and* the humility to learn that language if you do not know it already.”²³ The symmetry involved in this linguistic territoriality principle, as I shall call it, is the only really significant way in which equality of respect can be shown to be meant seriously, consistent with the full acceptance of systematic asymmetric bilingualism at EU level.²⁴

²³ Not an advice unanimously given to European authorities, least of all by those who care about nothing but business: « It is worthwhile to consider whether the EU should answer the call for uniformity on the issue of language business transactions and further protect itself against the potential onslaught of language regulation by each individual Member State. One potential action the EU might take would be to declare a common language in the EU market. » (Feld 1998 : 199, quoted by Phillipson 2001 : 113-114).

²⁴ The common distinction, in the area of language rights, between the territorial principle and the personality principle, is often misleadingly formulated (see Réaume 2003 and Patten 2003 for some useful discussion). Which language(s) one is allowed to learn at public expense, to speak and write while expecting to be heard, or to get information and services in, is obviously dependent on the legislation of the territorially circumscribed political entity in which one would like to do these various things. In this sense, all language rights regimes instantiate a territoriality principle, just as they instantiate a personality principle in the sense that the rights are ascribed to individual persons. The key distinction is in terms of how accommodating the regime is to the linguistic wishes of the people who happen or settle within given borders. This is obviously a matter of degree, with at one extreme, even public schools, public services and public life adjusting swiftly to people’s desires under the sole constraint of cost-conscious use of resources (threshold levels, etc.), and at the other even private language use and acquisition coercively constrained. Once it is understood that, in a high-mobility, high-communication context, the unconstrained dynamics of differential learning and maximin puts weaker languages under permanent pressure, a serious concern for linguistic diversity and equal respect requires this dynamics to be constrained, but in a way that cannot be dismissed as inacceptably coercive. This entails a restriction of the constraints to particular contexts, all in the “public” sphere. But once the contexts are defined, the linguistic

In concrete terms, what the linguistic territoriality principle amounts to is a set of coercive rules about the public use of language that will systematically frustrate the powerful pro-dominant-language bias incorporated in the interaction between probability-sensitive learning and maximin communication. The territoriality principle will typically impose public education in the local language even to those who would prefer to have their children taught straight in the lingua franca. It will impose administrative or judiciary procedures in the local language even in cases where the local public officers master the foreign language better than the foreign person they have to deal with masters the local language. And it will impose the use of the local language in the political realm, even if more residents could be enabled to participate to some extent if another language were used. As a result, more people will learn the local language, or they will learn it more thoroughly, than if probability-sensitive learning had been left unconstrained. More interactions will also occur in the local language than if maximin were given free rein, thereby creating both a stronger incentive and a wider opportunity to learn the local language.²⁵

If the local language is a powerful language, which most immigrants spontaneously have a strong incentive to learn, the territoriality principle will hardly be felt, as only a very light constraint may be enough for the spontaneous interaction of differential learning and maximin communication to keep that language firmly in place. But when this is not the case, when the “natural” incentive to learn is weak, the enforcement of the territoriality principle will not only be felt, but more often than not bitterly resented by non-native speakers of the official language, unless it is credibly framed as a fair way of showing equal respect. After “Ban dubbing!” and “Poach the web!”, this is, then, my third recipe for linguistic justice in Europe and in the world: *Grab a territory!*

constraint needed to protect the weaker language can be linked either to where one is (what is the local official language) or to who one is (what is one’s native language). The first option — which corresponds to the territoriality principle — has the decisive advantage of being both less coercive (one can change one’s residence, not one’s mother tongue) and cheaper to implement (because of the locally-bound nature of many of the services concerned). Whether it offers a stronger guarantee of survival to a threatened language depends on the relative probabilities of the homeland running empty and the race no longer procreating (or intermarrying heavily or spreading thinly).

²⁵ The much earlier firm application of the territoriality principle is the secret of Switzerland’s relative linguistic peace, compared to Belgium and Canada. There has never been a Germanisation of Geneva analogous to the Frenchization of Brussels or the Englishization of Montréal. The solution here advocated for Europe can be said to have had an early formulation by the European Commission’s first president: “The fact that the Europeans do not speak the same language cannot disturb us. Switzerland provides us with the classical example showing that linguistic variety does not constrain, but rather enrich, and we wish for our Belgian friends that they can soon be cited as another example.” (Hallstein 1973: 112, quoted by Kraus 2004).

Arbitrary borders

One question which immediately arises is of course: Which are the languages which should be given a territory, and how should their borders be determined? There is no neat answer to this question, but I propose two (fuzzy) conditions as necessary and sufficient. One is that there must be a sufficiently vigorous movement asking for it — otherwise, the energy needed to bear the cost of foregoing large economies of scale and other costs related to the setting up of institutions in one's own language will not be forthcoming. The second condition is that the presence of the linguistic group must not be the product of recent immigration, whether from inside or outside the country. Fairness is respected to the extent that it can credibly be said: "You need to learn our local language here just as we would need to learn yours if we settled in your own place." Your place may be small, and the probability of my ever settling there zero, but the symmetry needed for equal respect does not require equal sizes or equal probabilities of settling. For those allophone immigrants who do not have a protected linguistic homeland — the Kurds, the Arameans, the Baluba —, the solution does not consist in allowing them to grab a territory where they decide to migrate but where they are traditionally settled.

Thus, if and only if the two conditions mentioned are satisfied — vigorous movement, ancient roots —, with no doubt some grey area in each case, a territory can be associated with the language. The borders are bound to be contentious, and some compromise will need to be made between geographical neatness and linguistic homogeneity. People stuck on the wrong side of the border will need to have their vested rights protected through special measures that will disappear with their generation. And of course languages other than the official one can thrive and even get official support, providing the protective measures are powerful enough to keep promoting the official language into maximin position in a sufficient number of contexts for the desire to learn the official language properly to be shared by all .

Strengthening the "natural" grip

A second difficulty is precisely that for three distinct reasons, one general, two more restricted in scope though of special importance for the European Union, the mechanisms of linguistic integration, essential to the implementation of the territoriality principle, are losing their grip. The first reason is the spread of satellite and cable TV, which considerably reduces the exposure of immigrants of all ages and their children, grandchildren, etc., even born in the

new country, to the local language. Quickly reinforced by all types of sorting mechanisms (if the café's TV broadcasts nothing but Turkish programmes, what is the chance of it attracting or retaining non-Turkish customers?), this makes it considerably more difficult for linguistic competence in the local language to spread through the immigrant population, including through the school system, as kids are far more likely to keep speaking the immigrant language to each other than used to be the case.

A second reason applies more specifically to those cases in which immigrants, in addition to their mother tongue, have some knowledge of English and soon find they can get away with hardly any knowledge of the local language, as most local people also have some knowledge of English. Especially when the local language is not widely spread and when the immigrants are not sure how long they will stay, probability-sensitive learning will never be sufficient for the local language to take over from English in most everyday circumstances. Worries about this new phenomenon are now commonly aired in such countries as Sweden or the Netherlands.

The third reason applies more specifically to those countries with a developed welfare state that make it possible for a significant proportion of the immigrant population of working age to live for long periods without any insertion in a work community. The fact that many of the less skilled jobs in the service sector require a certain level of linguistic skills makes it particularly difficult for immigrants to find jobs, even in the absence of discrimination.²⁶ And the outcome is that the work sphere is less effective than earlier and elsewhere in providing immigrants with both the opportunity and the motivation to learn the local language. Effective language learning for all therefore arguably requires tougher measures, such as compulsory language courses, sanctioned by proficiency tests, for new immigrants, the prohibition of the immigrant language in class and in the playground, the constrained mixing of people from various origins in schools which are in danger of becoming ethnically homogeneous.

Stabilising diglossia

The third difficulty concerns the possibility of stable diglossia. Suppose the process has gone so far that practically everyone in a particular country knows the lingua franca in

²⁶ In the Region of Brussels, for example, the rate of employment in the working-age population is 64% among Belgian citizens (including naturalised immigrants), but only 33% among non-EU citizens (Decker & al. 2000: 15).

addition to the country's main mother tongue.²⁷ Will there then not be a growing number of contexts in which the local language will no longer unambiguously be the maximin language even among natives, with of course a propensity to tip immediately to the lingua franca as soon as anyone not fully assimilated turns up. Think of the spread of English-language courses in continental European Universities.²⁸ As this trend extends downward from postgraduate to undergraduate levels, there will be a number of domains in which natives of a particular language will find it easier to communicate with one another in English than in their own common mother tongue, or in a variant of their mother tongue perforated by strings of lexical borrowings and occasional full sentences in English. Can some territorial community's universal bilingualism really be more than a transient stage between universal competence in the local language only and the withering away of that language?²⁹ Here too, the only safeguard is a toughening of the territoriality principle. But is this sustainable when it is not only the newcomers or some local linguistic minority, but the whole of the native population, which is made to keenly feel its pinch?

Linguistically free enclaves

The final and potentially most formidable difficulty stems from the asymmetric migration of highly skilled people that the implementation of the territoriality principle will tend to generate.³⁰ Once the highly skilled of a particular country and their families are about as competent in English as in their mother tongue, the obstacle to moving to the English-language part of the world will shrink to about the same size as moving to a place where their native language is being spoken, and become far less prohibitive than the obstacle to moving to a country whose language would need to be learned afresh to be able to fully participate in social life, or even sometimes to manage barely comfortable survival. This transforms the part of the world in which the lingua franca is being spoken — what I call the ground floor of the world — into a powerful attractor of high skills, which other countries will have the greatest difficulty counteracting.

Of course, the loss of a number of highly skilled people trained at great expense at home may be partly offset through remittances sent home, through the creation of networks from

²⁷ The table of Appendix 4 suggests that English is known by 94% of Swedish young adults, for example.

²⁸ See Ammon 2001a, Maiworm & Wächter 2002

²⁹ In the case of Dutch, see the fears expressed by Salverda (2001) and Willems (2002)

³⁰ This paragraph summarises the argument developed in Van Parijs (2000).

which the home country will benefit and above all through the return, after a number of years, of better trained and better connected highly skilled workers. Indeed, one might wish to argue that this process is not fundamentally different from the sort of systematically asymmetric migration of high skills that has always existed between cities and their rural hinterland. There is a similarity, but there is also a deep difference. It is not just that remittances are not quite of the same relative magnitude as the daily pay commuting workers take to their villages when returning home every evening. The solidarity relationship between a city and its hinterland is also far tighter, as a result of all sorts of explicit and implicit transfers organised by a state that encompasses them both. The concentrated use of high skills in cities can therefore be routinely regarded as serving everyone's interest far more easily than asymmetric trans-national migration. Consequently, countries which inflict on prospective settlers the cost of learning a lesser used language put themselves at a competitive disadvantage relative to ground floor countries and can only compensate it by making conditions more attractive for the people they need to attract back or retain, which means, one way or another, by shrinking the degree of solidarity expected from the more talented, the more skilled, the more mobile, towards the less qualified, the less able, the less mobile.

What can be done about this final problem short of giving up the territoriality principle? The cost to be paid in terms of prosperity and/or solidarity would no doubt be considerably decreased if all countries were linked together by a solidarity system that would automatically spread across borders whatever one manages to produce on the ground floor thanks to the fruitful collaboration of brains drained from all over. As this is still far off on any significant scale, inventiveness is in order. What about a combination of poaching — again — and ground floor enclaves? As a growing part of what is being produced, especially with a large high-skill input consists in knowledge, maximal worldwide leakage of the knowledge produced on the ground floor is part of what is needed to offset the free riding of the ground floor on the education, training and (self-)selection of the human capital it attracts. It is the very accessibility of whatever is done in English and the very fact that the spread of English makes the ground floor a receptacle of good brains from all over the world that also makes it particularly vulnerable to the poaching of whatever (informational) wealth is thereby produced. In addition to this poaching, other countries might also think of organising carefully circumscribed “linguistically free zones”, i.e. comparatively small areas with a strong high-tech potential, in which the linguistic territoriality principle is relaxed and in which therefore highly skilled settlers and their families are relieved of the heavy “tax” of

having to learn the local language, with the consequence that the lingua franca can rule within these enclaves about as imperially as it does on the real ground floor.

After having quickly gone through these four difficulties, my answer to the third interpretation of linguistic injustice — in terms of unequal respect — remains: *Grab a territory!*. But there will be many cases in which this grabbing will need to be done in a very delicate way (first difficulty), require more strenuous effort than used to be the case (second and third difficulty), and come at a cost that will not be easily offset (fourth difficulty).

Conclusion

This completes my response to the interrogation that the canteen exchange could not help generating. Yes, there is unfairness involved in the fact that one of the native languages is being picked, through countless uncoordinated choices, as the sole lingua franca. But this unfairness can be, to a large extent, compensated. Firstly, inequalities in competence in the lingua franca can be massively reduced through an effective ban on dubbing and other ways of facilitating early learning. Secondly, inequalities in the shouldering of the burden of learning the lingua franca can be compensated by poaching the web and free riding in other ways on the intellectual production of the natives of the lingua franca. Thirdly and finally, inequality in the respect expressed towards the various languages can be alleviated to some extent through demystification and ceremonial recognition, but above all through allowing each recognised community to give top status to its language within some home territory.

Providing fairness is vigorously pursued along each of these three dimensions, we can accept without rancour or resentment the increasing reliance on English as a lingua franca. We need one, and only one, if we are to be able to work out and implement efficient solutions to our common problems on European and world scale, and indeed if we are to be able to determine and secure, again Europe- and worldwide, a fair distribution of burdens and benefits, even in matters of linguistic justice.

Appendix 1: Abram de Swaan's Q-value and the incentive to learn

In his illuminating analysis of the emerging world language system, Abraham de Swaan (2001) puts great emphasis on the notion of Q-value of a language or combination of languages. The *Q-value* of a language L he defines as its prevalence (or the ratio of the number of L-speakers to the total population) multiplied by its centrality (or the ratio of the number of multilingual L-speakers to the total multilingual population). In various passages of (typically, de Swaan 2001:178), he closely connects this Q-value to the communication value of a language and hence the incentive to master it. The problem with this connection can be spelled out in at least three ways

1. Suppose we have the following distribution of native speakers in our constellation:

M(andin): 75%, D(utch): 5%, E(nglish): 20%, with practically all Dutch knowing a second language (E) and no one else. The Q-values of the three languages are then as follows:

$$M: \frac{3}{4} \times 0 = 0$$

$$D: \frac{1}{20} \times 1 = \frac{1}{20}$$

$$E: \frac{1}{4} \times 1 = \frac{1}{4}$$

These simple Q-values are not meant to directly capture the M-, D- and E-speakers' incentives to learn another language. The incentives are rather meant to be captured by the increases in the Q-values of one's repertoire as a result of learning one more language. It follows from the numbers assumed above that the Q-values of the three pair-wise combinations are given by:

$$E\&M : 1 \times 1 = 1$$

$$D\&E : \frac{1}{4} \times 1 = \frac{1}{4}$$

$$D\&M : \frac{4}{5} \times 1 = \frac{4}{5}$$

Consequently (and quite plausibly) given the choice, an M native would choose E (Q-value increased by $1 - 0 = 1$) rather than D (increase by $\frac{4}{5} - 0 = \frac{4}{5}$), an E native would choose M (increase by $1 - \frac{1}{4} = \frac{3}{4}$) rather than D (increase by $\frac{1}{4} - \frac{1}{4} = 0$), and the residual unilingual D speaker would also choose M (increase by $\frac{4}{5} - \frac{1}{20} = \frac{3}{4}$) rather than E (increase by $\frac{1}{4} - \frac{1}{20} = \frac{1}{5}$). But what about an outsider, without a common language with

any ode Swaan's perspective, the incentive to learn. But this should make us expect that an outsider will learn E ($Q = 1/4$) and even D ($Q = 1/20$) rather than the language exclusively spoken by three quarters of the population ($Q = 0$). Is this not altogether counterintuitive?

2. Suppose now that one third of the M speakers (25% of the total) have learned E. The Q-values are then given by

$$M : 3/4 \times 5/6 = 5/8$$

$$D : 1/20 \times 1/6 = 1/120$$

$$E : 1/2 \times 1 = 1/2$$

Relative to our initial situation, the only relevant change is that the number of E-speakers has doubled, which should make us expect that outsiders will be even keener to learn E than before. Yet, de Swaan's approach predicts the opposite. Given the choice, the outsider will now opt for Chinese (Q-value of $5/8$) rather than English (Q-value of $1/2$) - against the plausible presumption (insightfully suggested elsewhere in the book) that a language becomes less attractive to learn as its speakers learn other languages, and more attractive as it is learned by speakers of other languages.

(By contrast, the predicted incentives for insiders are better behaved in this case, since the Q-values of the three combinations are

$$E\&M : 1 \times 1 = 1$$

$$D\&E : 1/2 \times 1 = 1/2$$

$$D\&M : 4/5 \times 1 = 4/5$$

Given the choice, the remaining unilingual M natives would still choose E (Q-value increased by $1 - 5/8 = 3/8$) rather than D (increase by $4/5 - 5/8 = 7/40$), and an E native would still choose M (increase by $1 - 1/2 = 1/2$) rather than D (increase by $1/2 - 1/2 = 0$), though in both cases with diminished enthusiasm. As to the residual unilingual D speakers, they would still choose M (increase by $4/5 - 1/120 = 95/120$) rather than E (increase by $1/2 - 1/120 = 59/120$), but keener to learn than ever as D's Q-value has collapsed as a result of the massive increase in M's centrality.)

3. Suppose Americans heed Henry Ford's advice (de Swaan 2001: 223, fn1), by deciding not to learn any foreign language. With a given number of English speakers (both natives and learners) and hence a given prevalence level, this depresses the centrality of English and hence its Q-value. Yet, the global incentive to learn English, according to de Swaan's own remark in this connection, increases instead of decreasing. Does this not prove that what really matters is prevalence (possibly weighted by some index of economic or political power), and not centrality, since increases in centrality which do not also boost prevalence decrease rather than increase the incentive to learn?

The point is not that there are other determinants of language learning than expected Q-value increases, which an econometric approach could try to trace by lumping many variables into a predictive model. de Swaan's model has the merit of pointing to the micro-mechanisms that helps make any observed correlation intelligible. But the way in which he conceptualises the communicative dimension of differential language learning is misguided, and indeed unnecessarily complex. Probabilities of interaction, for which various proxies could be devised, provide a simpler and less counterintuitive predictor.

Appendix 2: Why we need just one lingua franca

Case of three groups of three native speakers each (E, F and D).

Option 1: Random (one E and one F choose D, one F and one D choose E, one E and one D choose F)

Option 2: Double Lingua Franca (both Es and one D choose F, both Fs and one D choose E)

Option 3: Single Lingua Franca (both Fs and both Ds choose E, both Es choose nothing).

Proportion of cases in which meetings of size n have at least one language known to all

n	2	3	4	5	6
Option 1	15/15	12/20	3/12	0/6	0/1
Option 2	15/15	16/20	8/12	2/6	0/1
Option 3	15/15	20/20	12/12	6/6	1/1

Appendix 3: Trends in linguistic competence in Belgium

Percentage of people who regard themselves as speaking “completely correctly” or “more or less correctly” a language other than their mother tongue.

Age:	55+	35-54	15-34
Dutch (among francophones)	19%	12%	4%
French (among Flemings)	15%	31%	35%
Second national language (among all)	17%	23%	21%
German (among all)	6%	5%	4%
English (among all)	11%	25%	36%

Source: Survey by INRA Marketing unit on behalf of TIBEM ("Tweetaligheid in beweging - Bilinguisme en mouvement") conducted in February 1999 on a representative sample of 692 people Belgian residents aged 15 or more who studied in Belgium.

For a more detailed analysis of these data and what they reveal, see Van Parijs (1999).

Appendix 4: Competence in English in EU member states

The most comprehensive cross-national data set on linguistic competence is provided by a special Eurobarometer Report prepared at the request of the Directorate Education and Culture of the European Commission, on the occasion of the European Year of Languages (Eurobarometer 2001). The selective presentation and analysis of the data in the published report are particularly clumsy in leaving out figures that are essential to get an adequate picture. But the data set is the most relevant there is, and a paper by Ginsburgh and Weber (2003), who had access to the data set itself provide some of what is most relevant for my present purposes. From their tables 2 and 2a, it is possible to compute the following figures for the proportion of people aged fifteen or more who mention English as one of the languages they “know”, first in the whole of their country’s population aged fifteen or more, and next in the fraction of that population under the age of 40.

Percentage who say they “know” English

Age group	15 or more	15 to 39
United Kingdom	99	98
Ireland	95	96
Sweden	79	94
Denmark	75	84
Netherlands	70	80
Finland	61	87
Germany	54	74
Greece	47	71
Austria	46	66
France	42	63
Belgium	40	55
Italy	39	63
Spain	36	61
Portugal	35	59
Luxemburg	19	27

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