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POLICIES FOR LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

It is my intention in this brief article to comment on a number of concepts which have for some years now dominated the debate on language and culture – both within the European Union and further afield. The concepts which interest me here are the ideas of uniformity, diversity, national and supra-national multiculturalism, and finally the idea of 'difference' and the right to 'difference'. The more profound issue, the one which I might describe as 'smouldering' in the background of these concepts, is the relationship between, on the one hand, the special and partial, and on the other, the general and universal. This is the relationship, as determined by political and economic circumstance, which shapes the character of each historical period. It is an issue of crucial importance, especially at the present gloomy conjuncture, when culture and difference are now explicitly invoked as an arena for conflict and destruction, and as the arsenal with which such conflict will be waged.

Linguistic uniformity -- linguistic diversity: in these two aspects of linguistic and cultural reality we can discern opposing attitudes to the phenomenon of language – attitudes which have determined the historical course of individual languages and which outline the active operation of what we might call the value aspect of language.

The demand for linguistic uniformity, and the way this demand has been handled, to varying degrees and at various historical moments, demonstrate above all the *instrumental* dimension of language, and the inevitability of this dimension. Arguments for linguistic uniformity, from ancient times until the present day (the ancient *κοινός* – Greek/Aramaic, the standard national languages) have been prompted by historical circumstances in which one linguistic medium was imposed – by some ruling class or state, using a diversity of means – as the principal instrument of communication within a new set of historical conditions.

It is in linguistic reality, and in the demand for diversity formulated at various moments in history, that we see most clearly the *expressive* dimension of language, language as an element of *identity*. The case of the national languages -- of, mainly, modern European history -- illustrates the complexity with which the issues of *uniformity* and *diversity*, *instrumentality* and *expression*, are intertwined, not only in reality, but also on the level of attitudes, values and mythologies. Within the nation state we see the promotion of linguistic homogenisation and the instrumental dimension of language: the creation of the

national, common, standard language, based on a historically 'strong' dialect (in the case of Greece, that of the Peloponnese), proceeding alongside the 'stigmatisation', the marginalisation of *internal linguistic diversity*, of the 'weak' dialects which can no longer provide any guarantee of social status and advancement. 'Stigmatisation', above all, of any form of *heteroglossia* within the national borders.

While the nation-state was busy promoting linguistic homogenisation and the instrumental dimension of language within its borders, in its relations with the outside world the same state was championing the cause of linguistic diversity – in the form of a mosaic of *national* languages – and of the expressive dimension of language: the national language was the 'soul' of the nation, whose unique character and 'purity' must be preserved and protected from any 'corrupting' or 'contaminating' influence.

This nationalist version of the cause of diversity, then, has its roots in a defensive stance, a need to protect the national identity, and, deeper still, a perception of the expressive dimension of language which denies the origins of linguistic diversity, immeasurably older than any nation-state: its grounding – and its 'dissolution' – in the shared and undifferentiated human intelligence whose limits determine the underlying unity of the linguistic mosaic, of the linguistic Babel.

If, in its relations with the world beyond its borders, the nation-state *naturalises* linguistic diversity in a characteristic denial of the relationship between the particular and the general – the underlying unity of all languages – within its borders it is simultaneously engaged in *naturalising* linguistic uniformity, branding any form of deviation – other dialects, other languages – as a pathological transgression. It is on the construction of this myth that the linguistic ideology of the nation state is, largely, based.

It is a myth, however, which reflects certain historical realities: both uniformity and diversity – as well as the attitudes which surround and engender them – are products of history. Neither of them is a natural linguistic state of affairs threatened with disruption. This is an issue of such critical importance that I should like to dwell on it for a little longer.

Linguistic uniformity is, to a significant extent the product of a critical 'episode' in modern European history – the creation of the nation-states, a process associated with the values of the great bourgeois revolution of 1789. In the areas of language and culture these new values favoured the promotion of an *ecumenical* model in place of the old pre-national, feudal, anti-secular *communalism*. It is in the context of this new model, which coincides with the expansion of education to meet the needs of the new socio-economic order (industry, mass production), that we see the creation of those ultimate symbols of linguistic uniformity – the standard national languages -- and the decline of the remaining traces of medieval communalism, of the pre-national, pre-urban, linguistic (multilingual) reality: dialects, the existence of a variety of languages within one nation. In assessing the magnitude of this change, one must not overlook the degree of emancipation it involved. The loss of linguistic diversity was the price which had to be paid for the creation of a new, more rational, more civilised universality. Of course, as soon as this initial *ecumenical* imperative – shaped by the clash of new and old, of the new bourgeois class with the old

feudalism – had lost that emancipating capacity, then attitudes to language, too, lost their liberating content: linguistic uniformity as an instrument in the creation of a new, rational ecumenism was transformed into the national imperative of linguistic “purity” – with all the irrational, racial conflict and violence which that entailed.

In the situation of the present day, the defence of linguistic diversity in the name of the right to ‘difference’ must seek the broadest possible social, emancipating vision – a new, civilising universality – which will bring meaning to both unity and difference. Any other approach, however well-intentioned, is at risk of degenerating into a condescending approach to languages as mere folklore, or becoming the tool – involuntarily – of geopolitical designs which hypocritically exploit the right to difference in order to further the policy and economic hegemony of the centres of power they represent. In drawing attention to this dimension I am reiterating the need to approach the issue of uniformity and diversity on historical terms – *relative* and not *absolute* terms.

The naturalisation of cultural-linguistic diversity, on both the supra-national and national levels (minority languages) – its reduction to the status of a natural resource, threatened in the same way as natural biodiversity is threatened – is no different in quality, despite its diametrically opposed starting-point, from the naturalisation of uniformity as an instrument of national ideology. In both cases the role of history, and the relativity of history, are abolished. In both cases, the relationships between particular and general, partial and universal, are subjected to the same treatment, despite their opposite points of origin.

Those who advocate the cause of national uniformity seek to abolish difference in pursuit of a partial – and therefore artificial – universality. Whereas the cause of difference – mainly as expressed nowadays through such concepts as culturalism, multiculturalism, etc. – reduces the idea of universality to a superficial, paratactic – and therefore also artificial – co-existence of different, but supposedly equal, groups (communal, ethnic and sexual minorities).

Those who play the leading role in orchestrating the calls for difference are, as always, those in possession of power. As Wallerstein points out (1919, 149), “those in power – whether political, economic or social power – may choose to show aggression towards the weak (xenophobia) or to show a magnanimous understanding of their ‘difference’. But in neither case do they forfeit their own privileged position”.

There is, however, another, related, issue which we must examine here. All too often we see what I regard as a simplistic equating of multilingualism with democracy. “On the cultural level ... Europe will never succeed in disarming ethnocentrism or replacing it with a new awareness unless it adopts the following course: ensuring that millions of children, from their very first days at school, long before they have acquired any political opinions, have direct access to numerous European languages and cultures” (Dalgalian 1996, 7). “Through languages we can offer generations to come, the builders of the Europe of the future, the intellectual and democratic spirit which will provide the necessary foundations for a genuine European consciousness” (Appel d’Amsterdam 1996).

Although respect for linguistic diversity is incontestably an integral part of a democratic

outlook, it is a gross exaggeration to identify multilingualism with democracy and a peacefully ordered democratic society. In the end it is not language – whether the context is monolingual or multilingual – which unites or divides us, but *ideas*. History abounds in examples (the most recent being that of the former Yugoslavia) which undermine any attempt to equate language – again, whether the context is monolingual or multilingual – with democratic or any other form of social harmony. The democratic consciousness of the Europe of the future will be determined in the arena of ideas, and not – directly – in that of languages. The deliberate mythification of the role of language is intended to obscure this vital dimension.

Language – be it, again, in a monolingual or multilingual situation – defines an intermediate level in the functioning (or malfunctioning) of human societies. Above and beyond this intermediate level – again, monolingual or multilingual – lies the level of *understanding and agreement*. And it is on precisely this level – the level of *ideas* and *practices* (including the practices of linguistic policy generated by these ideas) that the key battles are decided. It is *ideas*, not – directly – language, which unite or divide, whether the situation be monolingual or multilingual. This is the meaning of the concept of the morality of communication, either in its Habermasian version or in other, more traditional, forms (such as the Indian concept of *kshetra*).

But I should like to return now to the multicultural glorification of the concept of difference. In what way does it concern or involve the subjects of that difference and, more particularly, to focus on one case, the disadvantaged individual, the marginalized individual living in the most wretched of conditions? The real danger for the well-intentioned champion of difference and the rights to difference is that he may all too easily descend into a form of patronage. Patronage is a form of management, and, at the end of the day, management favours the managers. Let me offer a stark example of what I mean: what does one do when faced with an Indian peasant who sends away from his village the teachers who have come there as part of a literacy programme when he realises that the programme will not be offering lessons in English – knowledge which he regards as a guarantee of success and social advancement – but instead in the local language of his region (Mey 1989, 117)? The argument that the local Indian language is an important element of a linguistic and cultural diversity which is under threat and must be conserved will, of course, be met with absolute indifference by those it concerns most directly, the same indifference with which they may well receive the argument that the programme in question will help to preserve their own ‘otherness’. History abounds in examples of *language shift*, precipitated by extra-linguistic, historical circumstances and compulsions. For the Indian peasant the question of language and difference is a question of *inequality*, not a purely linguistic or cultural issue. What he seeks – urgently, forcefully and spontaneously – from the teacher or researcher is that the stance they adopt to the problem of language and difference be based on its broader *social* constituents. And this path – which is indicated to us by the subjects of difference themselves, because they are the ones who experience it at first hand – is the only fruitful course we can follow, the only one which respects the subjects involved and the nature

of the problem. Support for the particular identity of social or ethnic groups, one element of which is, of course, their particular linguistic identity, must be based on social – not purely cultural or linguistic – terms. This is the only course open to a social scientist who refuses to accept the role of apologist for the existing state of affairs. The transition from a *cultural* or *multicultural* view of language and difference will inevitably transform the terms in which we approach the issue of the relationship between particular and general, partiality and universality – the same issue with which all the great civilising visions in the history of mankind have had to reckon. And within this relationship language plays an important, but not the dominant, role.

I believe that at the present time it is of critical importance that the open question of a new civilising universality – a question which is above all else of a social nature – should be approached on the basis of a particularly acute observation made by Hobsbawm (1994, 245): “when society has failed, then the nation [and, one might add, religion] appears as the ultimate guarantee”. If nationalism – and communalism, too, in a number of its forms – is a withdrawal from society, which has failed to convince as a rational, civilised universality, then it is the duty of all those who refuse to renounce the possibility of some utopia to remain within society and remain faithful to the possibility of its becoming, one day, truly civilised. And it is here that the concept of the morality of communication acquires particular significance. The morality of communication establishes a level – the level of agreement and understanding – above and beyond the level of language. It is at this level that the debate on language policies within the EU acquires its meaning. What form will the European ‘morality of communication’ take? The values of the free market operating without restraint and of the products of that free market in the field of language? The surrender of languages and their users to the law of supply and demand? Or possibly, instead, a new humanism (however outdated that term may sound) which will offer some kind of bulwark against the general process of commodification and will promote, in the field of language, alternative proposals, alternative designs? This, I believe, is the issue we must confront, first and foremost as citizens of Europe, and only then in our capacity as linguists. And one more point, as the drums of war and the rumble of impending catastrophe sound in our ears: those of us who are engaged in language and culture, whether as scholars or as involved citizens, or even in both capacities together, must utterly reject the prevailing scenario which sees in the horror of terrorism only the savage features of the barbarian Other, not acknowledging in his barbarity the effect of another, allegedly civilised but in fact equally barbaric culture, but instead seeing only an abhorrent pariah, a creature perpetrating evil without reason, a barbarian existing at the very outermost limits of humankind. For it is to those same limits that we shall before long see consigned those, too, who, while sharing society’s abhorrence of terrorism, still refuse to avert their eyes from social injustice, from the exercise of power unchecked by law. If we fail to resist the convenient scenarios of good and evil fabricated by our leaders to further their own ultimate ends, then the whole debate about language, culture, multiculturalism, difference and the right to difference will cease to have any meaning, will be no more than

an empty exchange of hypocrisies among scholars and academics, docilely providing a mantle of academic respectability for the sinister designs of their political leaders.

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