

Communication and Power – A Rational Perspective

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Note: These notes are of necessity shorthand – see the bibliography for references on evidence of many of my claims.

Physical and mental communication(s): Cost

When discussing the costs in communication, it is important to start with a differentiation of what I shall call “physical” and “mental” aspects, at two levels, in relation to *communication(s)* and in relation to *power and control*.

When people “communicate” with each other, they can travel themselves and exchange *commodities* (“physical communication”), or they can exchange *ideas* (“mental communication”); see Table 1, page 136). It seems to me that while the costs for physical communications are enormous, the return on investment low and negative, and the rationale for much of the movement of commodities non-existent (except for market capitalism), the costs for mental communications are relatively much lower, the return on investment much higher and with few side-effects, and the rationale a positive one for peace and democracy (on this, see, e.g. Sachs [ed.] 1992 and Galtung 1996). Languages are our most cost-effective communication tools.

Table 1 – Communication (physical or mental) as exchange of commodities or ideas

	<i>Physical communication: exchange of commodities (including physical mobility of people)</i>	<i>Mental communication: exchange of ideas</i>
<i>Means of communication</i>	Motorways, roads, railways, airplanes, airports, bridges, tunnels, ships, etc.	Spoken and signed languages, visual and aural images
<i>Tools (vehicles) needed by individuals</i>	Legs, bicycles, motorbikes, cars, lorries, etc.	Physical apparatus for speaking, signing, reading; paper & pen, board & chalk, typewriters, TVs, computers, radios, music instruments, clothes, food, movement, etc.
<i>Cost for material investment by society</i>	Massive (see Means above)	Relatively large (materials for language learning, training of teachers & translators, interpretation equipment etc.)
<i>Cost for material investment by individual</i>	Relatively large for anything above bicycle	Relatively small for most basic tools
<i>Cost for mental investment by society</i>	Massive (research, planning, production, maintenance)	Relatively large (research, planning, interpretation & translation)
<i>Cost for mental investment by individual</i>	Relatively large (time & effort)	Relatively large (time & effort for language learning)
<i>Return On Investment (ROI)</i>	Negative, including environmental side-effects	Positive

Physical and mental control: Cost

The second aspect has to do with to what extent power and control are exerted via physical or mental means (see Table 2, page 137).

When control is exerted through punitive or threatening measures, through a repressive state apparatus and further developments of this, the controller forces the controlled to pay the costs (for the military machinery and the techno-military complex, the police, the prisons, the mercenaries). The costs are again enormous and the return on investment questionable for most of the world's population. In addition, the resources are prevented from being used for more positive purposes – all of us can cite figures for how few percent of the world's military budget would solve all the world's problems with clean drinking water, shelter, health services and basic education for all, or how much larger the increases in prison budgets in the USA have been than the increases in education budgets.

Control through carrots gives the controlled a bit more of their share of resources than control through sticks. Control through ideas is the most important form of control, also because the controlled themselves pay for most of the control “voluntarily”, through supporting the consciousness industry: education, mass media, religions. They are being controlled through their own partial consent, through attempts at colonisation of their mind, their consciousness, in a hegemonic way. But hegemonic control also creates and enables resistance, counterhegemonies. In earlier hegemonic control where the legitimation came from a god, the controlled did not necessarily need to understand the overt messages in religions – these were often delivered in a “sacred” language (Latin, classical Arabic, Sanskrit) not understood (at least fully) by the subjects. In *cuius regio, eius religio* (the one “owning” the region also decided about the religion for that region) it was enough to accept the legitimacy of the authority of the power-holder – this was the covert message. In modern hegemonic control we can modify the thesis to: *cuius lingua, eius cultura*. The one who “owns” the language also determines the content of the hegemonising message. This is of course the rationale for why the messages of McDonaldisation (see Hamelink 1994 for this concept) come in (simplified) English and why everybody worldwide is supposed (and *wants*) to learn English. This enables global hegemonic control and homogenisation.

But this control through ideas also means that there is more choice: by whose messages do you want your mind to be colonised?

In order to understand and critically reflect on the messages, to deconstruct them, you need to know the language of those messages well. You also need to appreciate what kind of messages go more often with what language. *Not* because it would be impossible to express anything in any language; you can certainly talk war – or peace – in any language. But it seems that the users of, e.g., Esperanto, have used the language often for messages of peace, democracy, harmony, conflict resolution, grassroots orientation. It also seems that “international English” in consciousness industry is more often used for messages which may support less-positive orientations and less reflection on the long-term consequences of a destructive life-style, destructive not only for the planet as a whole but also, here, specifically, for linguistic and cultural diversity. Not caring, not knowing.

Thus it is imperative to think of the different types of exertion of power and control and of the different means (including different languages) used for control, in terms of the cost for world peace, environment, biodiversity and linguistic and cultural diversity, the future of humankind on earth.

Table 2 – Exerting power: means, processes and sanctions

	<i>Punitive</i>	<i>Remunerative</i>	<i>Ideological</i>
<i>Means</i>	sticks	carrots	ideas
<i>Process</i>	(physical) force	bargaining	persuasion
<i>Sanctions</i>	negative external (punishment, shame)	positive external (rewards, benefits, cooptation)	internal (guilt; good or bad conscience)

(from Skutnabb-Kangas 1990, 16, mostly based on Galtung 1980)

Arguments

Does it help to show, with the help of rational arguments, that the costs are lower if a country, groups of countries (like the EU or the NAFTA or the ACP) or world organisations (like UNESCO) adopt rational language policies which include multilingualism (and Esperanto as one part of this) and respect linguistic and cultural human rights? Is language policy going to be changed with the help of rational arguments which show that it is better for the future of the whole planet to support linguistic and cultural diversity (in addition to biodiversity) than to enhance homogenisation as one of the results of linguistic and cultural genocide?

I am afraid rational arguments have not counted so far. Some important issues for discussion, including some claims, could be as follows:

1. If linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism were to be promoted as part of a rational language policy, this would mean respecting linguistic human rights, including protecting and promoting minority languages. What is the record of Western states so far in relation to linguistic human rights? Here are some of my answers:

- Linguistic human rights have not been respected. Dominant Western states have tried to prevent the acceptance of international and/or regional human-rights instruments on language rights, especially language rights in education.
- Educational language policies in the West have to a large extent been organised against most scientific evidence about how education should be organised if it is to promote high levels of multilingualism (see articles in Skutnabb-Kangas [ed.] 1995). It has involved linguistic genocide for linguistic minorities and monolingual reductionism for linguistic majorities, coupled with inefficient foreign-language teaching, and in both cases blaming the victims for the results. The fact that high levels of multilingualism have been reached in most elite education shows that the means for education promoting high levels of multilingualism are well known. It would be perfectly possible to make everyone multilingual at high levels, without losing any content matter (Skutnabb-Kangas and García 1995).
- A wrong educational language policy in underdeveloped countries, in many cases promoted, advocated and partially financed by the West with its experts, is:
 - the most important *pedagogical* reason for “illiteracy” in the world;
 - the most efficient way of preventing the grassroots from organised resistance to continued neocolonial exploitation.

Western language policies have to a large extent been based on *false either-or thinking* (you need to choose *between* languages, you cannot have both this language and that language and maybe others too). It has also promoted *subtractive* rather than *additive* language learning: the learning of a dominant language has been presented as necessarily happening at the cost of a dominated language, instead of in addition to it.

2. If the West has led and continues to lead the way in irrational language policies, in linguistic and cultural genocide, and in prevention of linguistic human rights, and if the West is trying to spread the ideas in this irrational language policy to other parts of the world (with a fair success), how likely is it that European and international organisations change their policies just because we and others give them rational arguments to the contrary?

Not likely, is my claim. Just like biologically argued racism – or, for that matter, sexism, classism, imperialism, neocolonialism, etc. – are *not* matters of getting the right information, *linguicism*, linguistically argued racism, is not an information question. It is a question of power relations. In analysing power relations one has to analyse who benefits. Purely human-rights oriented approaches are naive if they disregard power relations – and many of them do.

3. Only if we can show to the power elites that not only can *they* themselves benefit from more rational language policies but that their own privileges and present benefits are going to be severely curtailed if they do not adopt a more rational policy can we do something. The costs of the present-day power politics will be high for the elites in terms of constraints on their own life conditions – after all, they breathe the same air and have to eat the same polluted food as we others, and the “safe” havens in which to barricade oneself are shrinking. Violence breeds violence.

In addition to rational arguments, there has to be a certain element of both carrots and perceived or actual threats, before the power elites start rethinking. We have to present future scenarios with both these elements – and alternatives.

Conclusions

Firstly, we have to analyse the role of states and international organisations. Who controls them, and for whose benefit do they work? We cannot rely on the states, controlled by elites, to be nice and rational. The pressure has to come from the grassroots. The Esperanto movement is a good example of organized grassroots. So far, the movement has, at least since the 1930s, concentrated on working inward. Now is the time to work more outward again, and this symposium is a good example of doing that.

Secondly, we have to relativise the question of costs. What are necessary communications? What are necessary costs for necessary communications? Physical communication costs enormous sums, pollutes the planet, transports often unnecessary things, often unnecessarily. We have to make it cheaper to produce food and commodities locally where it is possible and instead use the money for improved mental communication. This includes supporting linguistic and cultural diversity and the learning of languages.

Thirdly, the messages in mental communication are important. Whose messages do we want to speak/sign? By which ideas do we want our minds to be colonised globally – by messages of Coca-Cola and McDonald’s, or by messages of peace, democracy and sustainable development (like many Esperanto messages)? We have to analyse the sophisticated means used for control, especially control through ideas, and we have to analyse linguicism and other means of hierarchisation and their cooperation and coarticulation.

Fourthly, we who are multilingual must stop being tolerant of the monolingualism of linguistic-majority populations in the big dominant countries. *They* are the ones who cause much of the costs – but we pay, because so far we have agreed to learning their languages in order for communication to work, while many of the Brits and North Americans and French and Russians and Chinese have not learned our languages.

One way of forcing them to see what their monolingualism costs the whole world is that we for a while stop learning (or at least using with them) their languages and learn Esperanto instead or in addition. Then they need to learn it too. This presupposes that we trade more with each other for some time, and several other things which we do not have time to go into during this

conference. But the important issue is to start a zero-tolerance campaign where we stop tolerating both monolingual reductionism and the “diffusion of English” paradigm (see Table 3, based on Tsuda 1994 – see also the discussion of this in Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1996), and start advocating the “ecology of languages” paradigm, which includes minimally bilingualism but hopefully multilingualism for *all*.

Table 3 –Diffusion of English and Ecology of language paradigms

<p>The diffusion of English paradigm</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – capitalism – science and technology – modernisation – monolingualism – ideological globalisation and internationalisation – transnationalisation – Americanisation and homogenisation of world culture – linguistic, cultural and media imperialism <p>Ecology of language paradigm</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – human-rights perspective – equality in communication – multilingualism – maintenance of languages and cultures – protection of national sovereignties – promotion of foreign-language education
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Finally, we have to show the controlling elites that the world is *not* a zero-sum game. It is not necessarily so that if we win, they have to lose. Both can win, for instance from a rational languages policy and from the granting of linguistic human rights to everyone. Or, at least: everybody, including the dominant elites, loses if this linguistic irrationality continues.

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