

Language

Principles for the Linguistic Future of Europe

Philippe Van Parijs on Justice, Fairness and Respect among Languages

Europe is a continent where more than 300 languages are in use. Its language situation is nothing if not complicated. The 23 national languages of the EU member states have been recognized as official languages of the Union. A further 40 are recognized by the Council of Europe under its *Charter for Regional Minority Languages*. Another 120 languages - ranging from Alderney French, Basque and Breton to Welsh, West Flemish, West Frisian, Yiddish, Yurt Tatar and Zenatiya - are listed in the *UNESCO Atlas of Endangered Languages* (2010) as 'endangered'. In recent decades large numbers of immigrant languages have arrived and established themselves: London alone has over 300 immigrant languages in its schools, and so has Barcelona; but these immigrant languages, which range from Arabic, Berber/Tamazight and Bengali/Sylheti through Chinese, Kurdish and Lingala to Turkish, have no status of any kind. And everywhere today, alongside all the languages mentioned, we find English as the global *lingua franca* and the ever more common vehicle for communication across language barriers.

The complexity becomes even greater when we note the many competing views in the European-wide debate on this issue - not just those of political economists (De Swaan, Grin), but also of writers and intellectuals (Amin Maalouf, Devoldere), human rights advocates and educationalists (Skuttnab-Kangas), UNESCO specialists in language endangerment (Harrison, Moseley), language policy analysts (Spolsky) and historians of the linguistic legacy of colonialism and imperialism (Calvet, Ostler).

And actually, when we ask how Europe handles all this diversity and multilingualism, the fact is that the EU constitution officially acknowledges only two basic principles: on the one hand it recognizes linguistic diversity as one of the cor-

nerstones of European civilization, while on the other it bans language discrimination. That is to say, in actual practice linguistic policy-making often amounts to an agreement to disagree, or simply embodies the lowest common denominator across the European political spectrum - between, for example, on the one hand France's constitutional monopoly on the French language (a model also followed by Greece and by Belgium, where the use of the three national languages is linked to territories), and on the other the more pluralistic practice in countries like Spain, the Netherlands and Britain, where at least the traditional indigenous linguistic minorities have been granted some degree of language rights and protection.

Understandably, therefore, people often regard European multilingualism as an issue of power, of might is right. Not so Van Parijs. It is not that he denies these power-political realities or the existing inequalities in the field of languages. On the contrary, he is very well aware of them, and his starting point is actually the unjustness of it all. Global democracy, issues of social and economic justice, and the need for a basic income have long been central themes in his work as a philosopher at the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL in Louvain-la-Neuve), where he holds the Hoover chair of economic and social ethics, while at the same time he also has long-standing connections with Oxford and its Political Theory project. Consequently, it now comes naturally to him to address the inequalities that exist in the field of languages, and to ask: What can we do about this, from the perspective of a general theory of justice? And what should we do to reduce the injustices we encounter in this domain?

Here, right at the outset, one might object: but is this actually a feasible prospect? After all, in the real world in which we are living, the free play of market forces can only exacerbate existing inequalities between people, including inequalities of language. So what about justice, fairness and equality - how could these ever be applied to the domain of language?



Pieter Bruegel,
*The Construction of the Tower
of Babel*, 1563.
Oil on oak panel,
114 x 155 cm.
Detail. Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna.

Again, Van Parijs begs to differ. Here we have a political philosopher who raises many important questions while he reflects on the principles of justice involved. For in all this linguistic diversity – with its attendant historical, social, cultural, psychological, collective, individual, economic and political ramifications – what rights do speakers actually have? What principles of justice, fairness, cooperation and respect apply here? What theory of justice can underpin those principles and how would this work out in actual practice?

There are many important issues that arise here. But three elements in particular mark out his position. The first of these is his conclusion –

arrived at through a series of political-economic cost-benefit analyses of language-learning situations – that interventions will always be necessary in this domain, if our aim is to ensure some sort of fairness and a reduction of inequality and injustice between the languages involved.

Secondly, and again a very important achievement, there is the set of working principles he develops for the actual reduction of unfairness – principles of cooperation, fair distribution, parity of esteem, respect, democracy and territoriality. As he makes very clear, especially in chapter 5 on the territoriality principle, these principles are directly relevant to an understanding of the Belgian language question. And as a French-

speaking Belgian with an excellent command of Dutch, Van Parijs certainly knows what he is talking about when he advocates the territorial principle ('in France one speaks French') as the most important and necessary safeguard a language can have: 'language survival requires a territorially differentiated coercive linguistic regime'. In Belgium people know this from history and experience; in the Netherlands English is already everywhere.

Thirdly, there is his advocacy – on grounds of democracy, access, fair distribution and egalitarianism – of an acceleration of the spread of English as *lingua franca* everywhere. Yet at the same time, as a corollary, he also proposes a language tax on all the world's Anglophones, to compensate speakers of other, less widely-used languages both when they are using those other languages and when they are learning English, for the unfair advantage and privileged position that mother-tongue speakers of this global *lingua franca* enjoy in the globalised world of today. This may be a thought experiment of a philosopher, and one may initially be inclined to dismiss it as unworldly – a bit like taxing the Italians for their overabundance of sunshine so as to compensate the Finns for their three months of polar darkness in winter – but on further examination Van Parijs actually makes a strong case, and one that will be very hard to refute. In that sense it could be said that Van Parijs is now doing for language rights what others over the past decades have been doing for animal rights.

There are many other thoughtful, well-developed and densely structured arguments in the two hundred pages of this book, supported by a further 60 pages of notes and a 15-page bibliography. Van Parijs's critical scrutiny of the principles and interests at stake here, his cogent reasoning, the high standards he sets and his forceful conclusions will make this book especially relevant to the future development of European language policy.

REINIER SALVERDA

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Further reading

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Moseley, Christopher (ed.) (2010). *UNESCO Atlas des langues en danger dans le monde*. Paris: UNESCO. See also: atlas@unesco.org.

Spolsky, Bernard (2009). *Language Management*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.