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Review of Philippe van Parijs: *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World*

Oxford University Press, 2011

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When thinking about linguistic justice we may have several intuitive ideas about what the implications of justice in the field of language should be. The first idea that may come to mind is the safeguard of minority languages in national states from being superseded by the majority language, and to the promotion of multilingualism. In the European Union the protection of the Member States' national language and the cultural heritage typically associated with it is realised by a complex system of translation of documents, legislation, case-law, work-meetings, and by the recognition of twenty-three official languages. Linguistic justice is then framed in national-cultural terms and convened into linguistic rights, protected by covenants and interpreted by courts. This is the rights-based approach that most legal scholars, philosophers, and political thinkers may refer to when talking about linguistic justice. It is refreshing to find in Philip Van Parijs' new book a formulation of issues of justice as referred to languages in a vital and powerful normative outlook. In a clear and decided tone, he reminds us in the introduction: "*An articulate conception of what linguistic justice means and of what it requires supplies resources for undermining the arrogance of the powerful, for empowering the indignation of the powerless, and for guiding the judgement of anyone who might happen to be in a position to arbitrate*" (p. 5). The national scene is abandoned for a more ambitious, worldwide reaching definition of what linguistic justice requires, and is linked to a protection of the most vulnerable. In other words, linguistic justice is turned into a matter of social justice that spans across the world.

According to the author, issues of linguistic diversity arise because of three main factors: multilingual countries becoming democratic, the need to function in different languages and finally immigration, and the consequent permanent linguistic diversity it entails. All of these aspects are universal, and therefore it becomes relevant

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to link the issue of languages and social justice. Another starting point for Van Parijs' analysis is the fact that the knowledge of English is spreading and increasing, making it a de-facto "*first worldwide lingua franca*". Thus the book's aim is to challenge this assumption, clarify the current situation and propose a normative framework that deals with the most compelling issues thereby related.

The book comprises of six chapters, of which the first, "*Lingua franca*", deals with the issue of English becoming the dominant language in Europe and in the rest of the world. As a lingua franca, English links different communities with different mother tongues, with or without having an official status, because communication across national borders needs a lingua franca as a means for argumentation and mobilization. To "*communicate, coordinate and mobilize*", argues Van Parijs (p. 28), we need a widespread medium of communication, a language that is spoken not only by those in power but understood and managed by a greater number of people. English may have become already the main vessel of trans-European communication. The numbers of self-declared English speakers in the European Union has exponentially increased, with the younger generations doubling the number of older ones in their knowledge of English compared to knowledge of German. We do not have such specific data on the world scale as we do for Europe. Nonetheless, although the number of Spanish and Mandarin native speakers surpasses the number of English native speakers, still when the number of secondary learners is added to that of native speakers, the result is the same as in Europe: English is bound to become the world's lingua franca as has already happened in Europe.

The first chapter also explains the two factors involved in this process of dissemination of knowledge of English. As a first factor we find the probability for actively practising English, to speak it and learn it, greatly affecting the chance for competence in a determinate language. This is called "*probability driven learning*" (p. 12) and is determined by both motivation (expectations about the communicative benefit deriving from learning a specific language) and opportunity (the context in which one individual has the actual possibility to practise the language she is learning). The second factor is the "*maxi-min language use*": the criterion that the author formulates to explain the systematic selection of English in a group, maximising the minimum knowledge of its members. This choice is not a democratic one, but one which does, however, minimise exclusion in a conversation, as it selects the language best known by the member of the group who knows it least well (p. 14). These two factors combined can be used to explain why English has arisen as a lingua franca worldwide in the socio-linguistic dynamics, together with a "*haphazard sequence of events that could easily have led elsewhere*" (p. 22).

Provocatively, if one has adopted a more traditional linguistic diversity outlook, Van Parijs is strongly in favour of the emerging of a global lingua franca, as he maintains that this is demanded by the "*pursuit of justice*" (pp. 24-31), and in particular by a global egalitarian justice that can only be developed by a transnational

demos, operating at a transnational level in a common language. By endorsing an (not new, see Sue Wright, Peter Kraus, Jürgen Habermas) argument that a shared language can create a demos by organizing the population in a common space for argumentation and mobilization, Van Parijs on the one hand decouples the question of language by that of culture and ethnos. By that he rejects the idea that democracy needs a common means of communication derived by a common ethnos and therefore also requires linguistic and cultural homogeneity: A not-desirable prospective at a European or global level. On the other hand, the author acknowledges the problems potentially derived by an ideological hegemony expressed by English as a lingua franca (pp. 31-37), verging on a sort of contradiction – Anglophones are after all “backed by universal exposure to their culture” (p. 36). Apart from these somewhat pure theoretical contradictions, such an enforcement of English as a lingua franca may not be easy to swallow for defenders of linguistic diversity or speakers of minority languages (on either a European or global scale). But Van Parijs bases his arguments on facts and strong theoretical assumptions and thereby in a very pragmatic way acknowledges what we may know already and have somewhat coyly tried to dismiss: proficiency in the English language is undeniably spreading, and that may be a positive evolution of things, for justice and democracy. This is because the powerless can be empowered with new means of communication, the possibility for improvement of one’s life can expand, and a global linguistic community may finally arise. But how can we deal with the negative effects and problems that the emergence of a global lingua franca triggers?

As a matter of fact, injustice can also be a result of the spreading of a lingua franca. As presented in chapter two, according to Van Parijs one of the challenges to be addressed is the fact that a lingua franca can be considered a public good in a technical, economical definition, thereby unavoidably causing *free riding* by the native speakers of the language elected to be the lingua franca. As second learners produce the public good of making English the lingua franca, Anglophones have not shared the costs of production (the long hours spent bent over grammar books, and summers spent in green though quite deserted English campuses attending classes, not to mention the actual monetary costs involved in learning a foreign languages). “Fairness does require a certain degree of burden sharing” (p. 51), so can English native speakers be required to compensate in some way, for their naturally undeserved benefit? How can the cost of producing a common benefit be shared? To answer these questions and to frame linguistic justice as *cooperative justice*, the author presents various alternatives for cost or benefit sharing. The objective set up is to show that the cooperation made possible by the existence of a lingua franca produces a surplus that should be fairly divided and allocated. The criterion that Van Parijs suggests to adopt is a compensation, transfer, or a tax paid by those who gain the most in order to cover the cost sustained by those who gain least from the cooperation – what is also called the “equal ration of cost to benefit” (p. 64 and following). This

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would not automatically imply that only Anglophones should compensate for the benefit of using their mother tongue as a global lingua franca, but also that small, non-Anglophone linguistic communities should subsidize larger (non-Anglophone) communities, as those small communities are proportionally benefiting more from the linguistic cooperation that enables them to expand their possibility for communication around the globe. Although there may be great difficulties arising from the attempt to estimate the cost of language learning, there is no way to escape the fact that some sort of transfer or linguistic global tax should be set up in order to subsidize the costs of English learning sustained by larger, non-Anglophone communities. This would compensate for the huge benefits of free riding on the lingua franca. Another issue would be to convince the governments of the States that they should introduce the linguistic tax, with the ethical but also economical arguments surrounding it. Another option would be “*compensatory free-riding*” (p. 78 and following), as to say access to all English-language content on the internet without payment. Not enforcing copyright rules too strictly, this internet “*poaching*” would be a first step to increase the opportunity to learn English for non-native speakers, compensating for “asymmetric language learning” and thereby increasing a fair linguistic cooperative justice.

From cooperative justice, Van Parijs moves to address the issue of “*Linguistic justice as equal opportunity*” (chapter three), trying to reconcile the emergence of a lingua franca with the liberal framework of distributive justice. From being a public good, ideally distributed by means of fair cooperation among communities, language is termed as an individual asset which may be affected by individual circumstances and resources. The linguistic rights approach, as to say the freedom to speak one’s own language, is replaced by a larger scale ambition to endorse the “*possibility or opportunity to realize one’s conception of the good life in all its dimensions*” (p. 91). One of the factors playing a role in the distribution of fair opportunities is language, as access to the learning of the lingua franca can become “*a major productive skill... a major asset or handicap*” (p. 92). Framing linguistic justice in terms of correcting the linguistic inequality of opportunities, Van Parijs reviews the possibilities offered by altering language legislation and theories by Rawls, Dworkin, and Romer to review whether their frameworks of distributive justice can correct the many arbitrary privileges held by the Anglophones. Finally, he proposes dissemination of English through immersion schooling and a ban on dubbing of foreign language movies and television programs, in order to improve the chances of the spreading of the lingua franca across different social classes. If equal opportunities nowadays are influenced by one’s proficiency in English (pp. 91-95), argues Van Parijs, then to frame linguistic justice as distributive justice we need to realize efficient and feasible ways for people to learn the lingua franca, and not only for wealthy, elite students who can afford high-level schooling or are by chance in possession of foreign contacts with whom they can practise their English skills.

In the final three chapters, Van Parijs is not actually proposing any policy changes as drastic as the introduction of a linguistic tax or the ban on dubbing of broadcasted programs. What he propose are sophisticated arguments for affirming the equal dignity of languages, or as he calls it “*linguistic justice as parity of esteem*” (chapter four) which, combined with the territoriality principle (presented in chapter five), represents in fact what is the status quo of national languages. It follows by the affirmation of parity of esteem between languages that linguistic communities may be able to impose their language in a coercive regime within a particular territory, including the possibility of imposing it on newcomers as a means of public communication (p. 208). The linguistic territoriality principle would preserve linguistic diversity throughout the world; this diversity is not, however, considered a good in itself, but a by-product of linguistic justice. The reaffirmation of the “*entrenchment of a considerable degree of inter-local linguistic diversity*” (p. 206) is elegantly presented in chapter six. The reader will find in the final chapters of the book many arguments that sustain the equality of all languages, but also the possibility for making the cost of symbolic equality (pp. 125-130) an actual expense for translation services of little practical use, in the author’s view (this part addresses the complex EU-system of official languages). In the following sections I will address some of the issues raised in the second part of the book, which is an instructive, useful, and enjoyable read that should not be summarily reduced in this review.

The strength of the book lies in its clearly stated, adamant support to the applying of liberal theories of justice to language policies. Linguistic justice is put right in the centre of the discussion, as it should be. Van Parijs’ proposals for policy change fuel new ideas to the well-known fact that the dissemination of English is an unstoppable force we need to confront and deal with. In the present knowledge society, it is undoubtedly true that Anglophones do have a better chance in accessing and navigating a global world market. It is important to spell this out, especially because we tend to dismiss how much these advantages can affect the individual’s freedom but also career and life chances. Moreover, a lingua franca can in fact be a vessel for communication at the international level, and the technological progresses of these years (e.g. social networks) are a proof of the power of English as a medium to spread political messages and updates on demonstrations all over the world, sometimes even surpassing state-based censorship and repression.

There are, however, some points that the author fails to properly examine and develop. The proposals for the breach of intellectual property by poaching of the web and the ban on dubbing of films may encounter some legal problems under EU-law, as these may be interpreted as calls for illegality that counters the regulations in these areas. Moreover, it is not clear what the implications of linguistic justice and the territoriality principle may be for immigrants. In the European countries, for example, we see that civic integration requirements for immigrants oblige them to learn the official language of the Member State they reside in. This expecta-

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tion is defensible in Western liberal theory, as it is a fair expectation for immigrants to be able to democratically function in the language of their host country. However, if we add to this expectation that of learning the lingua franca as well, we may create a larger burden for immigrants rather than an opportunity for their mobilization and empowerment. Trilingualism is, after all, still an elite-phenomenon (although one that the EU seeks to promote), and we should ask ourselves if this is a fair expectation of immigrants, some of whom may even need to learn the Latin alphabet when they relocate.

These are important issues that Van Parijs could have better addressed, as he is in fact strongly committed to giving an opportunity for mobilization to those who need it most, and immigrant communities may nowadays be exactly the linguistic communities which need better resources for their inclusion in the democratic processes. Nonetheless, these points do not invalidate the great contribution given by Van Parijs' book by articulating in new terms the discussion about what linguistic (in)justice is, what role English as a lingua franca should have in our world, and finally on how we should think about the creation of just linguistic institutions that fosters greater social justice.