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Linguicism

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[A] Origins of the term

Robert Phillipson and I published almost 30 years ago a large collection of papers under the title *Linguicism Rules in Education* (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1986). In one of my articles in it, I defined the concept. I have mostly used the same definition, also reproduced in Skutnabb-Kangas (1988, p. 13):

ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language.

Sometimes I have used “language/their mother tongue” at the end of the definition, for clarification. Since linguicism is a concept created by me, in this entry I will use the first person. My claim ever since has been that most education systems worldwide for Indigenous/tribal peoples, autochthonous, immigrant and refugee minorities, and minoritized groups (hereafter ITMs) involve linguicism (e.g., Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010). Hundreds of other researchers and thousands of ordinary people have used the concept (a Google search on 31 May 2015 gave 16,500 hits). Many people recognise spontaneously the concept and the phenomena it identifies, as soon as they hear the label. In this entry I will try to elaborate the concept somewhat more than in the definition.

The concept arose in comparison and parallel with other more established -isms, such as racism, sexism, classism, and, later, ethnicism and ageism. I/we felt that there was equally clear discrimination on the basis of which language/s people spoke or signed, natively or otherwise, and how they spoke it, as in discrimination involving the social constructs of race, gender, and class. But the discrimination on the basis of language or one’s mother tongue(s) had no name; therefore a label was needed. Likewise, there is discrimination on the basis of which language/s people do NOT speak/read/use/master. In many countries people who do not know English or do not know it well are stigmatized, pitied, and seen as deficient, by some others. In the same way, people whose mother tongue is not a “standard” variety of the language they use are often stigmatized. Thus, linguicism can apply to (a) which language(s) one uses; (b) how one uses them; and (c) which language(s) one does NOT use/know or one is not competent in, all according to the norms of those who (arrogate to themselves the power to) judge others by their languages. Linguicism can also occur intra-lingually (Lippi-Green, 2012).

[A] Unpacking the definition

According to the definition, the perpetrators or the agents of linguicism are “ideologies, structures and practices”. I will unpack each perpetrator in turn.

If monolingualism in, say, English, Chinese, or Russian is seen as preferable/ normal/ inevitable for ITMs, and the unlearning/forgetting of ITMs’ own languages is seen as a

necessary or at least worthwhile price to pay for this, we have a subtractive learning situation, and this assimilationist either/or *ideology* reflects linguisticism. Instead, in an integrationist both/and ideology, dominant languages are learned additively, in addition to mother tongues, and bi/multilingualism is seen as normal, achievable, and a positive resource.

If an educational system is organised so that all teaching (except possibly ITMs' mother tongues as subjects) happens through the medium of the dominant language and the teachers are monolingual in it, we have a submersion learning situation, and the school's *structure* reflects linguisticism. ITM children who do not, at least initially, know the teaching language, are pushed out by the way the school is organised; the children do NOT drop out. As Cummins (1989) and Thomas and Collier (2002), among others, have shown earlier, Kathleen Heugh demonstrated, on the basis of research from all continents, that it takes 6-8 years for a(n ITM) child to learn enough of an L2 to be able to learn THROUGH an L2 (e.g. Heugh et al. 2011). A school structure that does not allow and encourage this is linguisticist.

Most *practices* where people get unequal access to power and both material and immaterial resources, based on their language/s, reflect linguisticism. This unequal access is often produced through attempts at colonising people's consciousness, through three processes: glorification, stigmatization, and rationalization. Firstly, dominant/majority groups, their languages, cultures, norms, traditions, institutions, levels of development, observance of human rights and so on are glorified. This includes claims about:

- (a) what the languages *are* – for example, logical, rich, able to describe everything (e.g., in science, because of their large vocabularies);
- (b) what they *have* – for example, grammars, dictionaries, teaching materials, well-trained teachers); and
- (c) what they can *do* for you – such as open doors, function as a window onto the world, enable you to talk to many people, get a good job, and so on.

Secondly, ITMs/subordinated groups, their languages, cultures, norms, traditions, institutions, levels of development, observance of human rights, and so on are *stigmatized*, so that they are seen as traditional, backward, not able to adapt to an advanced capitalist technological information society, and so forth. In the third process, the relationship between the groups is *rationalized* economically, politically, psychologically, educationally, sociologically, and linguistically, so that what the dominant groups do is always normalised and made to seem functional and beneficial to the minorities/subordinated groups. For instance, the dominant group is "helping", "giving aid", "civilizing", "modernizing", "teaching democracy", "granting rights", "protecting world peace", etc. These three processes help in reproducing the unequal power relations between the groups. Language plays a major role in this.

When ITMs and their "characteristics" and "possessions" have been stigmatized, their resources (both material and symbolic, cf. Bourdieu, 1977) cannot be converted into material or immaterial resources (good salaries, long formal education) or to positions of power, whereas the glorified dominant group's resources can be thus converted. And this unequal access in the conversion process can then be rationalized on the basis of the (presumed), socially constructed deficits in the subordinated groups - and their languages.

Unequal access to power and resources is often multicausal, and differences based on language often overlap with other socially constructed differences (e.g., race, gender, class, minority status, political opinion, etc). Therefore, it is often difficult to separate

discrimination on the basis of language from other types of discrimination. Also, language differences often get the blame in conflict situations, where lack of linguistic human rights (LHRs) coincides with lack of other rights. Here denial of LHRs is often legitimated by claiming that it is language differences that directly cause a conflict. The fallacious logic goes: “if minorities are granted language rights, they reproduce themselves as minorities, and this is what leads to the disintegration of the state”. In reality, unequal access to economic resources or political power is much more likely the main causal factor in conflicts. This caveat notwithstanding, it is also the case that people may be mobilized to demanding rights *also* on the basis of language. Often granting language rights works towards preventing conflicts. A group/nation with full LHRs may be satisfied with autonomy, instead of demanding independence. In any case, in the long run, LHRs also lead towards better access to resources such as better formal education, and, through this, better jobs and more (democratic) political participation.

[A] Contested understandings of power and language

There are various concepts of power, and of language, relevant for analysing and resisting linguisticism. Some mainly postmodernist researchers (e.g., Blommaert, Makoni & Pennycook, see below) see power as something discursive: it is created and co-constructed, and it manifests itself only in discourse situations where people interact and negotiate. In this view, nobody can *have* power. Others (e.g., Galtung, Bourdieu) see power as something that an individual or a group can have access to, depending on the acceptability and validation of the material and immaterial resources that they have and the positions that they fill because their resources are/have been validated by those who are already in positions of power. Of course these power-holders defend their privileges. Thus people’s and groups’ resources (including their languages) can in this view be constructed as more – or less – convertible into positions of power. The claim that one can “have” power is rejected by those who see power as only being created locally and contingently. They claim that the other position represents reification, thingifying something that does not exist as such.

Some of these post-modernists (including researchers like Blommaert, 2005: 390, and Makoni and Pennycook, 2005:138) also claim that languages (including ITM languages) do not exist. We are only supposed to have idiosyncratic ways of “‘‘languageing’’”. “Language” is a verb and has no reality outside the context where we utter something. These researchers see languages as momentary “movement” only. That means that none of us can “have” a mother tongue either. Mother tongues as concepts and claiming them is seen as ‘outmoded’ (Canagarajah 2005: 443), ‘irrelevant’, ‘quaint’ or ‘antedeluvian’ (May 2005: 321) and worse. Thus wanting mother-tongue-based multilingual education is seen as working against the interests of ITMs (Blommaert 2005: 60). This position can, unfortunately, often support neoliberal political forces, also by negating the lived experience of many ITMs. Our position, however, is to see languages as constantly changing (as everything living does), but at the same time also seeing them as “real”, more concrete.

I, with many others, see power, and languages, in *both* ways, depending on the purpose of the analysis of power relations, including linguisticism. Neither power nor language are either/or concepts. I see power as both a process but also as something that one can “have” in certain situations. We can equally well imagine that what we call language can sometimes be seen/behaved as a movement or process (i.e., “to language” as a verb). Other times it can be seen or behaved in a way that corresponds to something more concrete, something that one can “have” and claim ownership of.

Albert Einstein, Max Planck and Niels Bohr showed already at the beginning of the 1900s with their experiments that light could behave both as waves and as a particle. Likewise Einstein showed that space and time are not unchanging, and the same for everybody; they can vary on the basis of, for instance, the movement of the observer. My both/and view is that one has to be able *also* to see languages as something that can be captured, counted, learned, even written down, also in dictionaries - even if languages are never stable; they change all the time, as do the hierarchising relations between languages; these are processes. Sociolinguists might be able to learn from physics. There is no contradiction between treating languages as processes and, *at the same time*, as concrete. Claiming that it is only one or the other is illogical and unhelpful either/or thinking, in a world of both/and/and. People must also be able to claim languages: "X is MY language", or "X and Y are my mother tongues". Claimants of languages/mother tongues must have the right to agency; it is speakers (and signers) who decide whether they "have" languages/ mother tongues, and what these are. No outside researcher has the right to do this. It is thus also linguist behaviour to deprive ITMs of their agency if outsiders decide whether they (can) have a mother tongue (or two) and then to proceed to hierarchising the languages and their speakers on the basis of language, all at the same time as claiming that languages do not exist.

[A] Genocide and intention

When continuing uncontested, linguicism can lead to genocidal ideologies, structures, and practices. Many of those who object to the claim that most formal education for especially Indigenous and tribal children is today in many respects genocidal, react emotionally, rejecting the idea out of hand. Often they do not examine the evidence or know what genocide is legally. The *UN International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (E793, 1948) has five definitions of genocide in its Article 2 (emphasis added):

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed *with intent* to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily *or mental* harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Many people think that only physically killing a group is genocide. Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar (2010) have shown through a thorough legal examination and many examples that both earlier and present-day ITM education often fulfills the criteria for genocide according to at least definitions 2b and 2e, educationally, sociologically, psychologically, and economically. More court cases are needed to ascertain that it is genocidal also juridically; some of the concepts in the definition need further clarification, mainly the concept of intent. It is the same concept that needs clarification in the linguicism definition quoted in the beginning of this entry – an intention is implied in the phrase "used to legitimate...". Used by whom/what? Does that mean that we can only call something linguicism if the perpetrators of linguicism *intend* to discriminate (and to legitimate)? And how do we assess if an institution or structure or ideology "has an intention" in how it is being "used"?

There are several recent examples already where lawyers conclude that the "intent" need not be expressed directly and openly. No state declares: "we intend to harm

children". Instead, it can be deduced from the results. In other words, if the state organizes educational structures which are known to lead to negative results, this can be seen as "intent" in the sense of Art. 2. Ringelheim (2013, pp. 104-105), for instance, discusses a landmark judgment where the European Court of Human Rights

makes clear that no intention to discriminate is required for the discrimination to exist: the sole fact that a measure has a disparate impact on a minority is sufficient to establish the existence of differential treatment – whatever the intent behind the policy. This opens the possibility of addressing structural or systemic forms of discrimination.

Likewise, Päivi Günther (2003, 2006) concludes that discrimination can be structural, without any conscious intent on the part of the perpetrator. When discrimination has been built into a system, those who manage the system (the "perpetrators") need not themselves have discriminatory (e.g., linguistic) ideologies or intentions – the system does the discrimination for them. Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (forthcoming) provide further examples.

[A] Conclusion

Much of the literature about how to recognise, analyse, and, above all, counteract other discriminating and hierarchising –isms (racism, classism, sexism, imperialism, ethnicism, ageism, among others) is relevant for research into and action against linguisticism. Work on linguisticism can also introduce new aspects to the struggle against other –ism. There is enough to do.

Cross-references (to other entries in the Encyclopedia)

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Suggested Readings (not cited in text)