Language is a key dimension, along with class, gender, and religion, and partially replacing 'race', in the complex processes of hierarchising groups in society and maintaining and reproducing patterns of dominance. Language is used increasingly, instead of or in addition to other means of control in maintaining, legitimating, effectuating and reproducing an unequal division of both structural power and material and non-material resources between the elites of the world, and the dominated, the ordinary people. The world’s haves and have-nots are also partially constructed on the basis of their ethnic origins and culture (their cultural capital) and on the basis of which languages they know or do not know (their linguistic capital). These new -isms, culturally and ethnically argued racism (ethnicism), and linguistically argued racism (linguicism), are akin to and partially even in the process of replacing traditional biologically argued racisms, so that the way we label, talk about and attribute characteristics to individuals and groups and thus construct them, legitimates this unequal division of power and resources. People are thus no longer only divided into those with more and those with less access to material resources and structural power on the basis of their skin colour ('race') alone but also on the basis of their ethnicity, culture, and, again, increasingly, religion, and on the basis of their language (their mother tongue(s), and their competence, or lack of competence, in official and/or 'international' languages.

Linguicism (a concept coined by Skutnabb-Kangas) is ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and (both material and non-material) resources between groups which are defined on the basis of language (Skutnabb-Kangas 1988: 13). Linguicism is a major factor in determining whether speakers of particular languages are allowed to enjoy their linguistic human rights; not only the “negative right” (to be protected against abuse) but also the “positive right” to enjoy appropriately supportive state policies. Lack of these rights, for instance the absence of their languages from school timetables, makes these languages invisible. Linguicism is a much more sophisticated way of preventing the use of a language than brutal, open and visible prevention through punishment for using the language.

Linguicism can take many forms in creating hierarchies between (groups of) speakers/signers. Linguicism also creates hierarchies between and
within “languages”. “Language” is here put into inverted commas, because the concept is very unclear (dialects based on geography and power; sociolects; genderlects, etc – which of them are “languages”). Also, the existence of “languages” is increasingly questioned, partly legitimately because of this unclarity, partly because some influential scholars are indulging in intellectual games rather than what is reality for the speakers/signers of languages.

There are hierarchies between what are labeled “languages”. Generally, the more speakers a “language” has, the higher in the hierarchy it is. For instance, Aanaar Saami in northern Finland (with some 350 speakers), is lower in the hierarchy than Finnish (with under 6 million speakers). Finnish is mostly seen as lower than Arabic, and English is seen as still higher. But number of users is far from the only criterion as we can see from the list of the 20 languages with the highest numbers of first-language speakers (according to the Ethnologue; http://www.ethnologue.com/statistics/size): Chinese, Spanish, English, Hindi, Arabic, Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, Japanese, Javanese, German, Lahnda, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, French, Vietnamese, Korean, Urdu, Italian. Economic, political and military power are much more decisive than numbers in deciding the place of a language in the hierarchy. One instance of linguicism can be called linguistic imperialism. Robert Phillipson has written extensively on this hierarchisation.

“ITM” stands for Indigenous, tribal, minority and minoritised languages and their speakers/signers. “Minoritised” children can be a demographic majority in the country or area under discussion. Many African languages are minoritised languages from a power point of view although they have more speakers than those of official languages. Deaf people as a linguistic minority belong to the ITM category.

Most education of ITM children in the world reflects linguicism, ideologically, structurally, and in practice (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar 2010). When domestically or internationally dominant languages are used as the main teaching languages for ITM children and are thus learned subtractively in school (at the cost of the mother tongues) rather than additively (in addition to mother tongues), they become killer languages.

"Being" a killer language is not a characteristic of a language. It is a question of how a language functions in relation to other languages. Any language can become a killer language in relation to some other language. Besides, "languages" do not kill each other. The power
relations between the speakers of the languages are the decisive factor behind the unequal relations between the languages; this unequal relationship then causes people from dominated groups to learn other languages subtractively, at the cost of their own. Subtractive teaching through the medium of a dominant language replaces ITM mother tongues; it subtracts from their linguistic repertoire. Additive teaching through the medium of ITM children's mother tongue, with good teaching of the dominant language as a second language, adds to children’s linguistic repertoire and can make them high level bilingual or multilingual. They can learn both their own language and other languages well.

Killer languages pose serious threats to the linguistic diversity of the world. English is today the world’s most important killer language but most dominant languages (Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, French, Hindi, Swedish, Hausa…) function as killer languages vis-à-vis smaller or less powerful languages. There is a nested hierarchy of languages. An example: English might at some point become a killer language even in relation to Finnish and other "big" Finno-Ugric languages in some domains, for example some areas of research and publishing. Finnish, in turn, is functioning as a killer language in relation to both immigrant minority languages in Finland in most domains, and in relation to other much smaller Finno-Ugric languages (e.g. Saami) – and the Finnish Sign language.

All oral (spoken) languages can function as killer languages in relation to Sign languages, through enforced oralism if Sign languages have no or a minor place in the curriculum. Official/national oral languages may be especially significant killer languages vis-à-vis Sign languages. American Sign Language may pose serious threats to all other Sign languages, if it is learned subtractively.

When speakers shift to another language, and their own language disappears, what is often occurring sociologically, psychologically, educationally and linguistically can be seen as linguistic genocide, according to at least two of the definitions of genocide in the United Nations 1948 International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (see article Linguistic Genocide).

In studying causes for the disappearance of languages we find two explanatory paradigms: language death and language murder. When languages, ”the vast libraries of human intangible heritage”, disappear, is it (natural) death where speakers leave the languages voluntarily, for
instrumental reasons and for their own good? Or is it murder where educational systems, mass media, etc participate in committing linguistic and cultural genocide?

The difference between seeing the disappearance of languages as death or as murder is that if one believes that languages just disappear naturally, there is no agent. The only ones to blame are the speakers themselves. It is THEIR individual and collective responsibility … and they (seem to) have profited by language shift. If one, on the other hand, believes that languages have been murdered/ killed, one can analyse the structural and ideological agents responsible: the world’s economic, techno-military and political systems. Even when language shift has happened with what seems like speakers’/signers’ consent, ideological factors behind this consent can be analysed.

In most cases ITM parents who cease to speak their own language to their children, or who place their children in a school with a dominant language as the language of teaching and learning, have had no choice. A school with their own language as the main medium of teaching does not exist. Mostly the parents do not have enough research-based knowledge about what kind of education best supports children’s bilingual/multilingual development, or about the long-term consequences of their choices. Many have been made to believe that it is either/or: either you speak your own language (or, in the case of many Deaf children of hearing parents, the children’s mother tongue, a Sign language) to your child, and place the child in a school where that language is used. Then the child may learn that language and its traditions but, it is falsely claimed, does not learn the dominant language or get a job: her/his life chances, especially on the labour market, are ruined. Or you speak the dominant language, which is also used as the teaching language; then the child gets a (good) job; unfortunately, you have to sacrifice your own language and culture, if you want to support your child. This "manufactured consent" is difficult to analyse if one believes that languages, like plants, just die - they are born, they flourish, and they die, they have a certain life-span, and in our modern world, it is over for most small languages.

Instead, of course, it is perfectly possible to follow a both/and/and path. If ITM children are taught additively, with their own language as the main teaching language during minimally the first 6-8 years, while they also receive good teaching in a dominant language as a second language (preferably given by bilingual teachers), they have a very good chance of
becoming high level bilingual (or multilingual, if other languages are added later).

The manufactoring of consent into believing in the necessity of choosing between the languages and in the hierarchies created by linguicism can be analysed as consisting in three processes, presented in Table 1. Dominant languages (and their speakers/signers) are glorified, dominated ITM languages are stigmatised, and the relationship between the two types of languages and their speakers/signers is rationalised.

Table 1. Reproduction of unequal power relations through attempts at colonizing the consciousness: glorification, stigmatisation and rationalisation

1. **GLORIFY the majority/dominant group**, its language, culture, norms, traditions, institutions, level of development, observance of human rights etc.

2. **STIGMATISE and devalue the minorities/subordinated groups**, their languages, cultures, norms, traditions, institutions, level of development, observance of human rights etc so that they are seen as traditional, backward, not able to adapt to a postmodern technological information society.

3. **RATIONALISE their relationship** economically, politically, psychologically, educationally, sociologically, linguistically, etc., so that what the dominant group/s do/es always seems functional, and beneficial to the ITMs/subordinated groups (the dominant group is "helping", "giving aid", "civilising", "modernising", "teaching democracy", "granting rights", "protecting world peace", etc.

Linguicism can also create hierarchies within various types of “languages”, not only between them. There is a clear hierarchy between languages that are “only” used orally, in spoken form, and those which have been reduced to writing. Some linguists have even claimed that in order for something to count as a language, it must have a written form. There is no established label for this subcategory. It could, for instance, be called scriptism. Many of the discussions about the relative worth of various accents also reflect linguicism. They combine with classism and nativism: if you have an RP accent in English (if you speak the “Queen’s English”) or if you sound like a “native speaker” of English, preferably from the UK or the USA – and look “European” – your chances on the labour market are remarkably enhanced; the linguistic capital you have is more worth than having a “lower-class” accent or speaking “Nigerian” or “Pakistani” English. Studies on linguicism in practice from Indian and
Pakistani call centres show how the workers in these “linguistic sweat shops” are being trained to sound like British or American native speakers, also in their discourse styles, and how even their names are changed. Immigrant minorities in the USA are recommended to buy and use “accent repair” CDs.

There is likewise a clear hierarchy between spoken languages and Sign languages (audism can be seen as a subcategory of linguism). Many people know nothing about Sign languages; it is fairly recent that Sign languages have even been “officially” accepted as full-fledged independent languages, with no or little relationship to spoken languages. Many think that there is just one Sign language. Unfortunately even administrators and politicians who have been negotiating about the status and rights of Sign languages and signers for regional or international agreements have shown appalling ignorance.

Many people who use the term linguicism (just like with racism) seem to conceptualise it only as ideologies, as people’s attitudes towards languages (and their users). Some are seen as better/more developed and/or more modern, etc, than others; these languages are being glorified. Likewise, many people may notice practices where users of some languages are being discriminated against. But the power of the linguicism concept is lost if one does not look at the structures which create, legitimate, maintain and reproduce the discriminatory attitudes and practices. Even with positive attitudes, structures that hierarchise languages can be created, for instance in education. Most hearing administrators and teachers of Deaf children have rationalised the way the (oral) education has been organised; many subtractive educational systems that harm the children are organised with the best of intentions. Likewise, today medical doctors who advise parents (with false or partially ignorant arguments, claiming that children with cochlear implants do not “need” Sign languages), no doubt have positive intentions.

In controlling ITM groups/people, several strategies have been and are often still used. Firstly, ITM groups/peoples are, both structurally and through attempts at colonising their consciousness (into believing in the ideology of monolingual reductionism) prevented from developing their languages as one of the most important bases for being and for reproducing themselves as distinct groups or as peoples wanting self-determination. Then these groups can be denied self-determination because it is claimed that they are not “a people”, just a group or population: they do not possess
one of the prerequisites for nationhood, a language; they only speak a dialect or a vernacular, or what they sign is not a language, it is just iconic.

Secondly, groups are invisibilised and invalidated, partially also with the help of the labels used about them (the Deaf and Sign languages are completely invisible in most reference works on languages, for instance). Their resources are not accepted as resources. Competence in an ITM language (e.g. a Sign language) could be seen as linguistic capital, as a precious and valuable resource. But through a negative convertability process this does not always happen. Peace researcher Johan Galtung writes about three different type of power. Structural power is power on the basis of one’s structural position in society. A president, a director of a company, a general, all have power on the basis of their position. Teachers and parents have structural power vis-a-vis children. Material resource power can be money, houses, cars, paintings, books, weapons, a high salary; any concrete material possessions. Non-material resource power can be possessing knowledge, formal education, ideas, skills, competence in a language, etc. These three types of power can be convertible into each other. If you have structural power, you can convert it into material resources. If you have money etc, it is easier to get into a position of structural power (to become a high-level politician, you need access to money). Non-material resources, though, in order to be convertible to other types of power, need to go through a validation process, to assess their value. All types of knowledge are not seen as equally valuable. Competence in the official language(s) of a country and competence in English (and a few other “international” languages) are normally seen as important resources, as linguistic capital. They are validated, and are thus convertible to, for instance, good jobs. But competence in ITM languages is often invalidated. People's linguistic capital in ITM languages has so far been treated as invisible or even as a handicap. When it is invalidated, it is constructed as a non-resource, as non-convertible (not exchangable) to other types of capital, symbolic capital, financial capital, etc. The Deaf were not seen as a linguistic minority that could be included in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages; they were claimed to be “just” a handicap group.

Finally, ITMs are, through the rationalisation process mentioned earlier made to believe that both this and the unequal division of power and material resources in general is fair. Most of the arguments that exclude the Deaf from services that they should have, for instance, use arguments of this kind (see, e.g., articles by Dirksen Bauman).

It is vital for Deaf people to see through all these control processes, in order to argue forcefully for Linguistic Human Rights.
See also Audism; Linguistic Genocide

Further Readings


