

Considerations on English as a Global Lingua Franca

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by

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Abstract

Central to Philippe van Parijs' recent text, *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World*, are claims that the emergence of English as a global lingua franca is a) inevitable b) necessary for trans-national justice and c) to be accelerated. After first outlining the reasoning behind these claims, this article then goes on to argue that there are good reasons to doubt that English will inevitably become a global lingua franca; the absence of a lingua franca is not an insurmountable obstacle to the achievement of trans-national justice; and there is little justification for artificially accelerating the universalization of English.

Introduction

Phillipe van Parijs' recent text, *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World* (2011),¹ is the product of the author's long-time theoretical, political and personal engagement with problems of justice surrounding the issue of linguistic diversity. Should we be interested in this text as the first major attempt to systematically address the subject? That depends on whether or not you believe in a) 'real freedom for all' and b) its extension beyond the nation-state towards a global system of redistributive justice. Real freedom for all is van Parijs' name for a family of liberal-egalitarian conceptions of justice, proposed by philosophers like John Rawls, Armatya Sen, Ronald Dworkin, John Roemer and van Parijs himself (88). Liberal-egalitarian theories of justice tend to operate with the assumption that society has a basic structure, which Rawls defines as those institutions that distribute rights and duties and the advantages of social cooperation (2003: 6). According to van Parijs, even in the absence of global institutions the very fact of protected national borders is sufficient to distribute the advantages of social cooperation in a grossly unequal manner and as such constitute a global

¹ Henceforward, references to this work will be made in the main body of the text with the page number only.

basic structure that demands fair administration (89). From this point of view, the text is essentially an attempt to work out real freedom for all given the existence of a global basic structure and the fact of linguistic diversity.

Europe piques van Parijs' interest because he sees it as the most advanced image of our global linguistic future (207) insofar as English is speedily emerging as the lingua franca of this multilingual continent. He defines this term as any language commonly used for communication between people with different mother tongues (9). The relatively quick process of European integration has made it more necessary for a growing number of individuals from different linguistic traditions to communicate efficiently and all evidence points to the fact that English is increasingly chosen for this task, not only between Anglophones and everyone else but also between Finns and Spanish, French and Estonians, and so on. Presenting data from the 2006 special Eurobarometer report entitled *Europeans and their Languages* he highlights that among the young (15-24 years old) in 25 member states of the European Union, self-declared secondary competence in English is now five times greater than secondary competence in either of its nearest competitors, German and French, and twice as great as that in all the other languages put together (8). Though sketchy data indicates that English just beats Mandarin as the world leader in secondary competence, van Parijs points to the fact that the estimated 40 million people now learning Mandarin outside China is dwarfed by the supposed 177 million Chinese people currently learning English, indicating that it is only the latter with a reasonable claim to becoming a *global lingua franca* (10-11). I identify three core positions running through van Parijs' text: the emergence of English as a global lingua franca is a) inevitable b) necessary for trans-national justice and c) to be accelerated. The aim of this critical note is to challenge each of these positions.

Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World

According to van Parijs, forms of economic, military and political power affect the nature and intensity of communication in a given language by manipulating the directions of fields that demand interaction, such as trade, invasion, migration, and travel (20). Such a balance of power serves as the background for a micro mechanism he calls *probability-driven language learning*, which means that the likelihood of gaining and maintaining proficiency in a given language is greatly influenced by the probability with which one can expect to have to function in that language. This is especially true if one stands to gain materially from achieving competence in the language (12). Once probability learning leans towards a

particular language, another micro mechanism he refers to as the *maxi-min language choice criterion* becomes salient in further propelling the language into a dominant position. Van Parijs asks us to imagine a situation where you want to address a multilingual audience, whether one person or a crowd, and ‘efficient and inclusive communication is the sole concern’ (14). In deciding what language to speak, he claims that you will adopt the language of maximal minimal competence, that is, the language ‘best known by the member of your audience that knows it least well’ (ibid). Taken together, he claims that the two identified micro-mechanisms interact to generate the *maxi-min dynamics* which amount to an ‘explosive process’ that propels a single language to dominance in a given region.

When attempting to account for the spread of English as a European or global lingua franca, we can tell this story as follows. A point in history has been reached where global power relations have been significantly tipped in favour of Anglophone countries such that encountering situations where English is required or useful are more likely than for any other language. The probability of engaging in situations where knowing English would be an asset acts as a powerful motivator for people to learn it, which makes it ever more likely to be the maxi-min language in multilingual contexts. And, rather cyclically, the more frequently English occupies the maxi-min position the stronger is the motivation to learn it and the greater the opportunities arise in which it might be practiced. Van Parijs is emphatic that the maxi-min dynamics, operating in a high volume world of rapid mobility and communication, has snow-balled English into a global lingua franca position from which it could be dislodged only by ‘some unforeseeable apocalyptic event’ or a coordinated worldwide effort (24).

Van Parijs not only believes that the globalization of English is inevitable, he also thinks that this end is good, putting forward a two-stage argument to make his case. The first step is his ‘ethical contagion’ thesis which states that the more people communicating from different national backgrounds the more they can accept one another as equal interlocutors and the more quickly they can reach a reflective equilibrium, or well-considered consensus, on some kind of global egalitarian justice (26). Put differently, a lingua franca breaks down national barriers between those living in the world’s worse and better off countries by establishing smooth conditions of communication for trans-national identifications that are strong enough to support economic solidarity on a global scale. Van Parijs’ next step is to present his ‘political feasibility’ thesis which is the view that the implementation of a cosmopolitan conception of egalitarian justice requires creating a trans-national demos, or arena for deliberation and mobilisation, which is in turn made possible by a lingua franca (28). A lingua franca, he insists, fulfils the necessary democratic condition that the

deliberative process be accessible to all and is also a crucial tool for citizens to mobilise trans-nationally in struggles for justice (ibid). As a necessary condition for the possibility of global redistributive justice, therefore, van Parijs concludes that the ineluctable ascendancy of English to lingua franca status should be welcomed.

One major reason van Parijs gives for accelerating the spread of English runs as follows: since a lingua franca is a precondition of global justice, and English will eventually become the global lingua franca anyway, we should do all we can to help along the rapid spread of this language. Yet he is keenly aware that the expansion of English creates its own biases. One such bias is the arbitrary conferral of a growing opportunity advantage on Anglophones by boosting the market demand for their language abilities. Counter-intuitively, perhaps, herein lies another of his major justifications for quickening the growth of English. He proposes that by adopting strategies to this end we can more quickly reach a point of linguistic justice where the opportunity advantages for Anglophones are eliminated. That is to say, *linguistic justice as fair equality of opportunity* could be best achieved if speaking English became such a common skill that it lost any salient market value for native speakers (114-5). A worldwide program of early immersion schooling in the lingua franca he believes would rapidly ameliorate the rate at which competence in the lingua franca is reached across the world. But to make such a strategy realistic and fair it would require collective funding and coordination that could be achieved only by trans-national redistributive institutions that the lingua franca is itself supposed to make possible (105-6). Citing experimental evidence and comparative studies, he holds that one of the main reasons why small European countries have a better standard of English than larger European countries is because the former cannot meet the economies of scale required to make a dubbing industry in their local language feasible, and so must settle for the original sound with subtitles on their Anglophone audio-visual consumption (107). Given the relatively inexpensive nature of English language media exposure and its powerful impact on language learning, especially among the young, he maintains that a ban on dubbing is the best instrument we have to quicken worldwide English language competence (115). Moreover, he contends, since the vast majority of English language content is funded by Anglophones, learning the language in this way can be seen as a form of compensatory free-riding to help make up for the opportunity disadvantage suffered by non-native speakers (108).

Van Parijs understands that issues of linguistic justice can be highly sensitive, not least because languages can be seen as bound up with individual identities. For this reason he develops a conception of *linguistic justice as parity of esteem*, which guarantees equal respect

for all languages (119). Essentially, van Parijs is concerned that the spread of the lingua franca could be perceived as trampling over individual dignity by moving into the maxi-min position throughout the world and effectively reducing the already rapidly diminishing stock of the planet's languages. To secure parity of esteem for a given language he advocates a 'territorially differentiated coercive regime', which is designed to interfere with the maxi-min dynamics by legally mandating the use of the threatened language in public and educational contexts within a specific territory (134). While holding this to be the most effective way of protecting a language from decline, he recognises that it will not be an option for all linguistic communities as English continues to permeate the world. Many actual or would-be territorial regimes, he claims, will have to make tough decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis of protecting their language. On the one hand, they will have to forego the economies of scale associated with producing communication based materials in the dominant language (156-8). On the other hand, the territorial regime will find it increasingly difficult to attract and maintain human and fiscal capital which will tend to flow towards 'the ground floor of the world', i.e. those regions in which English is dominant or well-known (159-61). According to van Parijs, once these and other factors are taken into account *most* linguistic communities will not shoulder the burden of maintaining their language. This is particularly true of small, scattered and poor communities (168-71). He insists that parity of esteem is not offended as a result, for the right to protect one's language should be considered as a formal freedom to be actualised only if one is willing or able to foot the bill (172).

Is the Spread of English as a Global Lingua Franca Inevitable?

Summarily, van Parijs considers the spread of English to be not only inevitable but also necessary for global justice. By casting doubt over both of these positions, I attempt to demonstrate that we cannot justify artificially accelerating the spread of English. First, let me present some reasons for believing that the universalization of English may not be inevitable. Van Parijs admits that his explanation of how English continues to spread is 'stylised', 'speculative', 'open to empirical challenge' and may even sound like 'dogmatic assertions' on occasion (4). Upon analysing the Eurobarometer report already mentioned in greater detail and reflecting upon his conception of territorial coercive regimes, we find good reason for these words of caution.

Crucial to note from the Eurobarometer study (2006: 10) is the profile of multilingual Europeans who are described as most likely to be young, well-educated, growing up in a multilingual context, in a managerial position or a student, and motivated to learn. Education

seems to be a particularly important variable since there is a 37 percentage point increase in multilingual individuals who have at least 20 years of education compared with those who have no more than 15 years of education. Also noteworthy is the fact that for certain occupational categories there are increases in multilingual individuals of 12 (white collar workers), 27 (managers) and 29 (students) percentage points when they are each compared to manual workers (ibid: 11).² Even in Europe, which has an impressive number of university graduates and a corresponding professional class, large portions of the population are still unlikely to be well-educated or employed in settings where a second language is required or even advantageous. This is especially true in poorer parts of the world where much of the population can lack access to secondary education and professional employment. Here we find the first major obstacle to the ineluctable spread of English, namely that it could be perpetually thwarted by contexts where a large portion of the population is not well-educated or professionally employed. To expand on this point, there must be a reason for communication between individuals with different mother tongues if the maxi-min language choice criterion is to be effective. While robust forms of multilingual communication take place in a variety of professional and academic environments, allowing English to increasingly become the maxi-min language in those settings, a large majority of societies will tend to have a greater or lesser population who simply do not regularly encounter situations where English would be a noteworthy asset or the maxi-min language. Moreover, when we consider that 44 per cent of Europeans who claim to speak English as a second language find call to employ it only occasionally (e.g. on holidays) (ibid: 16), it becomes easy to see how the intensity of interaction between individuals without competence in the would-be lingua franca and those who do speak English as a first or second language could be so low that the maxi-min dynamics fail to motivate the former towards linguistic enrichment.

But, it might be asked, would probability-driven learning not be sufficient incentive to learn English given its associated economic opportunities? Though there is an obvious opportunity dimension driving the current expansion of English in many parts of the world we must be mindful of the potential limitations concerning this phenomenon. In particular, the reality of protected national borders and the labour restrictions they represent already closes off to many people a great deal of opportunities where knowledge of English would substantially increase their range of opportunities. For such people to improve their

² Other important variables are a) age, where there is a 21 percentage point difference in multilingual individuals who are aged 15-24 compared to those 55 years old and over and b) motivation, where there is a 38 percentage point increase in multilingual individuals who are very active language learners when compared to non-active language learners (ibid). Needless to say, education interacts with each of these variables.

opportunity range, probability-driven learning will dictate that they learn the language of states which would be most welcoming to them as a labour migrant and very often this language will not be English. Furthermore, there are sociological impediments to language learning that may be unlikely to dissipate irrespective of economic incentives: 34 per cent of Europeans (usually professionals) cite lack of time as a factor in failing to improve their language skills; 30 per cent (often the elderly) claim to be without motivation; and 22 per cent consider language learning too expensive (the figure being much higher in Eastern European countries where costs are the most frequently mentioned factor) (Eurobarometer 2006: 37). While we can imagine these problems to present some resistance to the spread of English in Europe, the problem of cost is a far greater hindrance in most other parts of the world which is unlikely to be overcome without serious attempts to make English language learning accessible to the poor. A ban on dubbing is one way in which the costs of language learning could be reduced, though its effectiveness for improving linguistic competence is premised on the questionable assumption that most of the world's poor would have regular access to English language media. My main criticism, however, is not against the degree to which a ban on dubbing is likely to succeed in spreading English, but rather that the maxi-min dynamics on their own seem insufficient to surmount the financial barriers to English language learning that are prevalent among the world's poor.

A further obstacle to the spread of English is van Parijs' idea of territorial coercive regimes. Even if he is correct and most of the planet's 6,000 languages ultimately collapse in the face of an increasingly dominant language, this could still potentially leave us with several hundred or at least several dozen relatively successful territorial regimes who manage to limit the effects of the maxi-min dynamics in their propagation of English. If we are to take van Parijs' proposal for linguistic protection seriously then the ability of at least some of the world's linguistic communities to perpetually thwart the claim of English to global lingua franca status must be recognised as a strong possibility. In short, it is distinctly possible that English is indefinitely maintained in limbo by the fact that i) the typical profile of multilingual individuals is often not met, especially in poorer countries, which therefore decreases the chances of multilingual interaction; ii) tight restrictions for labour migrants in Anglophone countries greatly limits the opportunity advantage of knowing English; iii) English language learning is too expensive for much of the world's population; and iv) the implementation of territorial coercive regimes could have long-term success across a significant number of regions in protecting the native language from Anglophone dominance. Effectively, counter forces to the maxi-min dynamics could consign English to being always

the lingua franca *contender*, but never the lingua franca. This is not to deny that the maxi-min dynamics could conceivably overcome these complex social realities. My observations should be seen simply as a brief attempt to demonstrate that there is good reason to doubt the claim that English will *inevitably* become the global lingua franca.

Is a Global Lingua Franca Necessary for Trans-national Justice?

Though English may not inexorably become a global lingua franca, is it especially important for taking steps towards achieving global justice? Where van Parijs and I disagree is first on the likelihood of a lingua franca leading to a universal reflective equilibrium on justice by way of ethical contagion, and second, on the necessity of a lingua franca for a trans-national demos. Let me argue each of these points in turn. Like van Parijs, Karl Deutsch believed in the importance of communication between different social groups to build identification and solidarity. However, unlike van Parijs who believes that such solidarity will lead to a more just world, Deutsch thought that it would more likely be used as a way to justify existing social stratification (Fligstein 2008: 130). While Deutsch was speaking in a nation-building context and van Parijs is more concerned with trans-national identity formation, it is not clear why we should expect a global conception of egalitarian justice to emerge in the latter case. As far as I can see, van Parijs' speculative account is based on i) a failure to consider the likely patterns of trans-national communication and ii) a misunderstanding of moral development. As already indicated, there generally needs to be a reason for interaction which is why trans-national communication is strongest among professionals. Yet such people are no more likely to converse with the poor in other countries than they are in their own, even when there is a shared language. Though, of course, a common language might be the best tool to facilitate communication between the worse and better off, we have no reason to expect that on its own it would lead to a substantially more just world any more than it appears to have helped reduce the gross wealth disparities that persist in countries like Brazil, South Africa and Nigeria to name but a few. Indeed, does the US or UK identify that much more with Ugandans or Kenyans or feel a greater sense of economic solidarity with these countries by virtue of the fact that they share the same national language?

Let us imagine, however, that strong patterns of interaction between the better and worse off do in fact emerge, would some kind of cosmopolitan moral psychology develop in the hearts and minds of the world population? The power of a contagion depends on how widely and deeply it manages to spread and these in turn very much rely on individual predispositions to the effects of exposure. A contagious disease, for example, could affect

most exposed people mildly, some seriously and others not at all. When it comes to ethical contagion the situation is similar, except that how much individuals are predisposed to the arguments and concerns of others greatly depends on the moral attitudes with which they approach the situation. Once again, to cite the great wealth disparities existing both within and between societies, we can be honestly pessimistic about the average level of moral development among the world's population and so be quite sceptical about the thought that those people who are exposed to morally relevant situations of justice would become infected with the moral reflections required to develop a basic cosmopolitan attitude.

Yet it is not beyond the bounds of imagination, or hope, that by some means or other a large part of the world could acquire an appetite for global justice. In that case, is a *lingua franca necessary* for the trans-national demos that van Parijs rightly considers to be a condition for the implementation of global justice? I submit that it is not. A firm and universal presupposition frequently appearing in van Parijs' work (28; 2000: 236; 2009: 18) says that a multilingual demos is impossible to sustain since multilingual situations inevitably lead to a separation of public spheres and political consciousness. Nevertheless, there are instances, with Switzerland being the most outstanding example, where a multilingual demos has managed to function extraordinarily well. Why could the logic of the Swiss case not be at least partly emulated on the trans-national stage? One obvious reason might be the sheer number of languages: Switzerland has to manage only four languages whereas the EU currently accommodates 23, and a global demos would have to deal with very many more. Yet is it such an imaginative leap to consider that the EU, as a political entity that has achieved significant cross-border identifications despite its linguistic diversity,³ could develop into a multilingual demos with redistributive competences? And if this is possible for Europe, might it not at least in principle be possible in some form for the development of a global demos in the longer term?

Indeed, van Parijs does not present many arguments that would attempt to convince us of the contrary. Following Jürgen Habermas (2009: 153), I would be far more optimistic about creating a deeper European identity through strategies that might 'trans-nationalise' the continent's linguistically distinct public spheres so that there is more overlap in their political discourse and they become more responsive to one another, rather than creating a linguistically unified 'supra-national' public sphere (Lacey forthcoming). Undoubtedly the absence of a *lingua franca* makes a trans-national demos even more difficult and expensive to

³ As of 2006, 62 per cent of people expressed some degree of attachment to the EU (Eurobarometer 2006).

achieve and maintain while at the same time negatively impacting the ability of people to mobilise across borders. Yet so long as a linguistically fragmented trans-national demos, partly inspired by the example of existing multilingual democracies, is considered a practical possibility there is no contradiction in attempting to achieve global justice in the absence of a lingua franca. On this view, policies to help spread English need not be part of any realistic strategy for achieving global justice. Furthermore, and more importantly, the possible or likely lack of a lingua franca in the short or long-term should never be an excuse for any less vigorous attempts geared towards achieving global justice.

Should we accelerate the Spread of English?

If a lingua franca is not necessary for trans-national justice, and if we cannot say beyond reasonable doubt that English is bound for global lingua franca status, then it seems that van Parijs' primary sources of justification for any strategy that would artificially accelerate the universalization of this language are much diminished. On the one hand, to the extent that there are problems with his ethical contagion and political feasibility theses, his case for this kind of policy measure is far weaker. On the other hand, so long as we are in doubt over the prospect of English becoming a global lingua, actively promoting the universalization of this language would seem like a rather extreme measure simply for the long-term negation of the limited opportunity advantage that Anglophones currently enjoy. Nonetheless, for those who might disagree in whole or in part with these arguments there are still good reasons for wanting to resist policies that would quicken the spread of English. Upon considering the impacts of a rapidly spreading language on parity of esteem, we can see that such policies are both unfair to the poor and disrespectful to non-Anglophone cultures.

Concerning unfairness to the poor, van Parijs' qualifies his idea of linguistic justice as parity of esteem by stating that the loss of linguistic diversity is only fair if it takes place against the background of a just distribution of global wealth. The quicker we move to this point, he affirms, the less unfair linguistic suicide will be for many communities (173). Yet it seems that van Parijs does not do enough to protect the languages of poor communities from the onslaught of a globalising language, especially if we subscribe to his belief in the 'explosive' power of maxi-min dynamics. What he seems to overlook is that by the time the level of worldwide competence in the lingua franca required to create institutions capable of administering trans-national redistributive justice is reached, it will be too late for many communities to use their new found resources to invest in coercive territorial regimes. Achieving the global justice required for poor communities to protect their language, in other

words, will already have eliminated many of those very languages that needed redistributive justice to be protected in the first place. And those languages that could still be saved will likely have endured substantial losses in competence amongst its should-be speakers. Empirically it is impossible to say how much linguistic diversity would disappear as a result of poverty on the logic of van Parijs' account, yet the normative question is just how much loss of this kind is permissible from the point of view of justice? Should we take parity of esteem seriously, there can be no other answer than very little. As a corollary to this argument, it should be added that an artificially accelerated spread of the lingua franca to more quickly achieve global distributive justice would also be potentially unfair to communities who can in principle afford to protect their language. For the time it takes to effectively complete the often messy process of creating a territorial regime may be too great to outstrip the sheer pace of an artificially accelerated globalizing language.

Parity of esteem means not only respecting the language itself but also the culture with which it is entwined. Van Parijs acknowledges that languages are largely learned by exposure to the culture to which it is attached and that the lingua franca is intimately bound up with Anglophone culture (33-5). Considering this would rightly lead us to be concerned about the possibility of an Anglophone cultural hegemony accompanying the universalization of English. For van Parijs, the appropriate response to this genuine worry is not for people to shy away from the lingua franca but to grab the 'global megaphone' by unapologetically appropriating English in their own way and for their own purposes such that it becomes less of a language attached to a particular culture and more a universal tool to express different ways of being and points of view to the widest possible audience (33). This strategy, however, is not only highly contingent on individual choice but also extremely difficult to achieve on a significant scale in light of his proposal that learning English should largely take place by exposure to English language media content which is for now mainly produced by Anglophone cultures. Given the impact of media intake on social norms and attitudes, massive worldwide exposure to the same kind of media content will surely lead to spreading the ideological biases and values of Anglophone cultures. Even if a point is reached where the lingua franca becomes a universal language of political and creative expression, getting to this stage by the means van Parijs advocates will involve a long process of asymmetric cultural flows making the world ever more Anglo-Americanised. In short, by the time the Chinese and Egyptians are robustly grabbing the global megaphone their thinking and behaviour will already have been very much influenced by exposure to the culture of their Anglophone counterparts. One might say that Hollywood and the Anglo-American ideology

of neo-liberalism is already doing a fine job of creating cultural hegemony. Granting this, without cultural barriers of multilingualism the process will be far more aggressive and difficult to resist.

On the grounds that the propagation of English is unjust towards the poor and bound up with the idea of cultural domination, a ban on dubbing, along with any other strategy to ensure or quicken the achievement of worldwide competence in English, is unjustified. To clarify this point, some linguistic injustices that raise their head due to the “natural” spread of the lingua franca through maxi-min dynamics may be unavoidable and so potentially acceptable without assigning blame. However, as soon as human intentionality enters the equation by implementing policies to assist the spread of English then the ensuing injustices are not necessarily unavoidable and there are perpetrators that can be held at least morally accountable.

Conclusion

Since both van Parijs and I agree in principle on the normative necessity and the practical feasibility of global egalitarian justice in the long-term, much of the foregoing critique can be viewed as family quarrels. Despite my claim that the maxi-min dynamics do not give us sufficient reason to believe English will in fact become the global lingua franca we agree up to the point that if there is going to be a global lingua franca then it will certainly be English. We both believe that a lingua franca would facilitate justice. However, I am more sceptical that it will on its own lead to a global reflective equilibrium on justice and would deny its necessity for creating a trans-national demos. Where van Parijs and I clash heads most directly is on the issue of intentionally helping along the spread of English. This, I think, is particularly wrong if we cannot prove beyond reasonable doubt that the language is bound for universalization and if there is nothing unfeasible about the idea of a trans-national multilingual demos. Yet even when these considerations are cast aside, van Parijs does not do enough to justify artificially accelerating the lingua franca insofar as it is deleterious to the linguistic diversity of the poor specifically and leads to the general domination of Anglophone culture.

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