

ECOLINGUISTICS, OR A MIRROR ON THE REAL WORLD

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From a linguistic perspective, it is not possible to separate Europe from the rest of the world. Languages which have spread far beyond the areas in which they developed are generally European in origin, with the exception of Arabic, Chinese and others such as Quechua and Swahili, with a more localised expansion. This diffusion has been accompanied by a devastating linguistic ideology which has allowed for the justification of the destruction of the linguistic heritage of all the areas where dominant languages have been implanted. It goes without saying that this destructive pattern began in the languages' own territory: the process of global linguistic homogenisation began in Europe, which currently finds itself in the closing stages of the process.

This fact must be kept in mind when it comes to constructing a new Europe, since the risk, which is more than ever present, is that the linguistic diversity that is preached (that of official languages) could become devoured by its own voracity. This is now apparent in some areas, such as science and technology, where English is virtually the sole language; but it does not fail to be the logical conclusion of a process based on the negation of the other: when we cannot annihilate them physically, we can ensure that they cease to be what they were. Not so they become like us (this is part of the ideology), but because distant populations are more easily manipulated.

In such a context, it appears obvious that the new Europe of the twenty-first century has to rebuild its foundations if it does not wish to perpetuate an ideology that will lead to its destruction. For this task it is necessary to find a perspective for the analysis that will enable the reestablishment of networks that

favour exchange. In the past 20 or 30 years ecolinguistics has provided a fresh perspective that, in terms of the dynamics of languages, has noticeably diverged from conventional sociolinguistics. If we analyse the postulates of the processes of linguistic planning, it soon becomes apparent that they intend to reproduce the models of the dominant languages, and history has already shown us that it is the model itself which makes the revitalisation of languages impossible if certain conditions are not present. For the majority of world languages, these conditions are impossible to obtain. This is also true of European languages. One only has to take French as an example to realise that the dynamic that has led to it being the hegemonic language in France has not only prevented its situation (including cases of official status such as in Belgium and Switzerland) from being the same outside the state, but it is also the cause of the precarious situation in which it finds itself in places where it is unable to impose itself. The same can be said of German,



the language with the greatest number of speakers in Europe.

Ecolinguistics aims to question the concepts with which we have traditionally worked and, in the case which concerns us here, the two concepts we need to examine are as basic as 'language' and 'linguistic boundary'. The concept of language which we use as our basis does not cease to be a cultural construct that implies a perception of the code as a closed element, clearly

differentiated from the rest. Such a representation of language is what allows us to state that in Germany or Denmark, for example, only one language is spoken; the same can be said for France or the United Kingdom if it were not for the fact that we know that other languages are spoken there, even if only in a residual manner. If we were to ask ourselves where most languages are spoken, in Italy or Switzerland, we would be bound to choose the latter. However, if we were to seek our

answer in what is probably the most consulted database in the world, the Ethnologue, we would find that the number of languages in each of these countries (without including either extinct languages or those introduced by immigrants) is the following: Germany (27), Denmark (7), France (23), United Kingdom (12), Italy (33) and Switzerland (12). Italy, therefore, is the state with the most languages, followed by Germany, two states which, although we may see them as plurilingual, we would never think of them as territories with so many languages. How is such a difference possible? It appears obvious that between two or three languages and the almost thirty that exist there must be some difference in the criteria employed in calculating the numbers. Nevertheless, both proposals are more similar than they may at first appear: one opts for the ‘invisibilization’ of non-official languages, and the other opts for ‘divide and rule’, which is also characteristically European. Both, however, share the same concept of language and end up with the same objective: the reduction of linguistic diversity, because both share the concept of the linguistic boundary as a limit.

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If we concentrate on how these more homogenous forms that we call languages are differentiated within the totality of manifestations of human language, we realise that what they do is identify a group that lives together and distinguish it from the others; however, the difference, except in cases in which a language has

occupied the space of another, is not unbridgeable, but rather the reverse. It is a continuum, a ‘buffer zone’ as it is known in historical linguistics, where traces of both languages are conserved. This is the concept of a linguistic boundary, understood as a space of exchange and not as an obstacle. What ecolinguistics proposes is that it allows us to see that the European perception of languages leads to fragmentation because on one hand it forces internal homogeneity and on the other it promotes external differentiation. These opposing forces end up leading to fragmentation and, therefore, unintelligibility and lack of understanding. This is a false basis on which to construct the new Europe of the twenty-first century. If we have to begin from a collection of states that, as much as they may claim to eliminate boundaries, do not recognise as their own the linguistic forms that are not official, we can only expect that by the same token they will impose a language which hides both variety and creativity. Currently the US is the space which can be seen as the Mecca of recognition: Europe no longer appears to be the place to triumph.

Ecolinguistics does not propose the development of processes in isolation. In the case of linguistic diversity it does not call for the recuperation of isolated languages, but rather the reestablishment of communication networks that allow for the revitalisation of languages as a whole. This implies that rather than taking communication from above, which we already know leads to annihilation, what we need is to recover the connections that allow for unmediated exchange. In other words, we should not give up what we are in order to continue to be free. In the same way we can see that the communities in South America, for example, would not have reached their current isolation if a single language had

not destroyed the social fabric and created the current Amerindian linguistic islands. We can also see that Europe will go the same way if we do not change our linguistic model.

It is clear that our self-destructive process is now far advanced, but Europe's recent history has been marked by a factor which could help restore the networks which are currently damaged. This factor is immigration which, aside from bringing a new diversity also brings us a new vision of our history, if we know how to take advantage of it.

As Harald Haarmann says: *'The broadening of the linguistic kaleidoscope brought on by the influx of immigrants is an experience which has opened the Europeans' eyes. Experiencing exotic cultures and linguistic contrasts has led people to focus their attention on the linguistic realities of their surroundings, which is to say, to the realities that had been twisted and falsified by the ideology of the nation-state and its glorification of mono-culture'*¹.

The same writer reminds us that: *'In a positive vision of the future, ethnic identity could be a source of cultural enrichment that could take on a significant role in the balance of self-esteem and the recognition of others in inter-ethnic relations. This process of equilibrium could operate without the distorting effects of ethnic boundaries that are erected in order to create stereotypes, to mobilise destructive intentions, to manipulate ethnicity as part of the political power games or to deny other groups their recognised rights to linguistic and cultural self-identity. We all know, however, that keeping ethnic identity under control depends more than any-*

*thing on individual good will and much less on the measures taken by any government'*².

Europe's demographic renovation therefore opens up an alternative path to the recognition of its own diversity. Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind that this path is not one way, that the basis of exchange is reciprocity and for this reason, if we fail to recognise and promote languages that have been historically marginalised, true coexistence will be impossible. The same goes for freedom, as those who establish submissive relations are creating the foundations of their own subordination.

The treatment which languages have received in Europe is clearly at odds with the objective of unification, especially as it discriminates against people in terms of their language and also because this discrimination contributes to the creation of boundaries-obstacles that make them more vulnerable. On the other hand, the same conception of languages as an obstacle means that diversity is seen more as a problem than as a connection. With such an ideology, the sole coherent outcome is the destruction of linguistic heritage, including official languages. From an ecolinguistic perspective, the restoration of the connections between communities that implies the recognition of their languages is a viable alternative to the communication that always requires a dominant language as an intermediary and a way of accommodating people without requiring them to stop being who they are, in other words, of robbing them of the possibility of making new, creative contributions to society.

1 HAARMAN, H. (2001) *Babylonische Welt. Geschichte und Zukunft der Sprachen*. Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York, p. 47

2 HAARMANN, H. (1996) *Language in Ethnicity. A view of Basic Ecological Relations*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, p. 184

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