

Applied Linguists' and Other Academics' Place in the Ecology of Linguistic/Cultural Sustainability

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Abstract

The presenter's research has been centered on 1) the cultural impacts of studying in a second language and, more recently, on 2) the language-of-dissemination practices of applied linguists. This presentation is drawn from his second focus, though each focus aims to understand what promotes linguistic/cultural viability and sustainability for the long term. In investigating the language-of-dissemination practices of applied linguists and other academics, the presenter holds that we are all part of the main. If academics who work in fields purporting to promote the learning of languages and about cultures do not put into practice in their own work multilingualism, even when they have the capacity to do so, the question of mindfulness in one's practice comes spontaneously to the fore.

The presenter has communicated and published previously on this research, from which he will share a sample of salient quantitative indicators. However, he intends in this short session to reflect more on the issue. Key questions he will address are: mindfulness in professional practice, knowing our place as academics and as part of the main, and how promoting sustainability practices with respect to human languages and cultures ranks in importance alongside promoting the same with respect to flora and fauna and even the planet as a whole.

Introduction

Oliver Wendell Holmes, one of the most widely cited and longest-serving justices of the USA Supreme Court, famously stated in a 1904 speech that: "Taxes are the price we pay for civilized society". Perhaps the deeply-divided, current electors and policy-makers in that country could benefit from a return to or at least some reflection upon his line of reasoning. After all, the benefits of living in any society are not freely obtained as it were, but rather are the result of collective efforts and some sense of common purpose, common cause. This same notion of taxation, which is much maligned even in the Bible, or at least the tax collectors are much reviled there, is also given some credence in that same Bible, with the proposition that from those to whom much has been given, much is also expected.

In Canada, with its formal policies supporting both official bilingualism (and multiculturalism), similar observations might apply to the idea of individual and

societal English-French bilingualism, not to exclude multilingualism either in this setting. Indeed, as with taxing all so that some common standards and benefits prevail for all, the notion behind official bilingualism is also noble, that a numerically, so-called minority language be given equal standing with that of the numerically, so-called majority language in school classrooms and in courts of law, among other settings, across the land. The notion is inclusive and egalitarian in nature; a kind of level playing field is offered by the state to all of its citizens. Yet, between legal obligations and the lived spirit, there is a great divide. If (official) bilingualism is to thrive, it cannot be merely an object of lip service. This paper explores this proposition in the context of Academe.

I should note that the research from which the ideas for this paper are drawn (Heffernan, 2007) falls within a paradigm of education and leadership for the promotion of social justice (in the vein of Paulston, Phillipson, Skutnabb-Kangas and even Davis, for example). It also finds resonance in the work of researchers and theoreticians investigating the ethno-linguistic vitality (1) of communities (e.g., Cummins, Edwards, Fishman, Giles, Hamers and Blanc, Landry & Allard, Landweer and Sachdev). It is also premised on my personal value system and the notion that sustainability change with me (and with each of us). Let us see where these theoretical orientations and my heuristic activity and value notion might lead us in reflections we are sharing collectively here on educating for sustainable well-being.

Rationale for this study

Academics, sometimes excoriated for their alleged isolation and removal from the ebb and flow of life in the mainstream, are also often turned to as *public intellectuals* for their expertise and advice. This is premised on the view from outside the university that academics are reflective and heuristic in orientation and acquire specialized knowledge that many do not have access to or the time to access. Indeed, while intellectual workers within Academe have come to know and live a life that is demanding, even overwhelming at times, they have also come to understand that mindfulness (2) is an expected part of their practice and that they have an obligation to disseminate the results and findings gleaned from

their work. It is clearly understood too that there is an ethics of research and a role of ethical leadership in the dissemination of same. As well, one's authenticity (or want of same) figures in the impression the academic leaves with others, as it does in the impression one leaves with others in life's exchanges in general.

In the case of academics' dissemination of their work, in Canada particularly, some specific facts and issues come to mind. In way of example, the intellectual work they are doing is being done in an officially bilingual country, in which approximately one-third of speakers are French. Among these, the foremost second language learned in schools and in society is English. Among the other 75 percent of Canadians, the foremost second language learned in schools and in society is French. There is no desire to obfuscate here; Canada is a multicultural country and so there are obviously many other languages also learned in schools and in society but, for our purposes, we will limit our reflections to these two, representing Canada's foremost first and second languages when looking at the country as a whole. This is not to suggest that my reflections about these might not also apply, albeit in more nuanced ways, to other languages in Canada (e.g., Aboriginal languages, heritage languages, and key languages of trade).

In the case of applied linguists' dissemination of their work, again in Canada particularly, they have an intended impact on the practice of approximately 75 percent teaching/learning French-as-a-second-language and of approximately 25 percent teaching/learning English-as-a-second-language. One might assume that a similar distribution in the choice of language-of-dissemination would be found in the related professional literature. This study set out specifically to find out whether or not that was the case.

The study is premised on the notion that we are all connected and that, accordingly, academics too are part of the main. Linguistic sustainability is a key component of cultural sustainability and, as we shall see in our discussion, both are more and more stressed in an increasingly globalized community where dominant languages and cultures have functioned much like steamrollers. What mindfulness (or want of same) that academics bring to their practice respecting language-of-dissemination is important, just as the mindfulness (or want of same)

we all bring to the choices made generally regarding sustainability are important (e.g., about the size or kind of vehicle we drive or whether we participate in car pools where possible, whether or not we contribute to funds aimed at saving or are otherwise active regarding endangered species, whether we choose to use greener forms of energy to light and heat our homes, or any of the 1001 life choices we make respecting sustainability). As suggested earlier, it is my contention that sustainability change begins with choices I make (and each of us makes) in our work and in our lives.

Brief overview of the study's methodology and findings

The study adopted a straightforward quantitative methodology, essentially counting the number of articles published in English, French or other languages in a representative sample of applied linguistic academic journals (3), with target audiences including primarily teachers of English-, French- and other languages as second languages, pertinent graduate students, and fellow applied linguists. As well, it counted, in the referential discourse embedded in these articles (i.e., the articles' references lists) the number of reference articles for which the language of publication was English, French or another language. It was assumed, if more articles were published in English or in French, each a major international language, that the researchers/authors would endeavour to incorporate, in their referential discourse, works in other languages emanating from differing scholarly and cultural traditions. Particularly in the Canadian context, it was assumed that the referential discourse of articles appearing in either English or French would refer amply to works emanating from the other linguistic-cultural scholarly tradition.

As I have presented elsewhere (Heffernan, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010) varying quantitative results from this research, I will present here only a summary overview of same.

In each of the journals analyzed, the choice of language-of-dissemination taken by the authors of the articles published was overwhelmingly English, in some instances literally 100 percent over several years. Indeed, this was notwithstanding such considerations as, in one instance, a special-focus issue

dedicated entirely to French immersion teaching/learning in Canada (some of whose authors were in fact Francophones), with 100 percent of the articles published in English, or the varying journals' overtly stated policy of promotion of publication in English and French and, in some cases, other languages too. The French Review, interestingly, published articles mainly in English, frequently entire issues exclusively in English. English does indeed appear to have become a *lingua franca* (steamroller?), even in the modern languages field dedicated to the teaching/learning of many languages and about diverse cultures.

In each of the journals analyzed, the language-of-publication of the referential discourse (i.e., articles cited) was also overwhelmingly English. In fact, in many issues of the varying journals studied, English was the exclusive language of the referential discourse embedded in entire issues. Articles which appeared in French were the exception in that they cited works published in English (and in other languages, occasionally). Perhaps as former and now deceased Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once remarked famously to a journalist about what it was like for Canada to live beside its southern neighbour: "Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant...even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that; yet, one is affected by every twitch and grunt". Those academics who publish in French might feel they are in a similar situation. In the vast majority of academic publication, it seems that English is a kind of unstoppable steamroller, even in areas of academic discourse where this finding would seem to be counter-intuitive. Generally in Academe, the kind of empathy we often value at the individual level is not associated with empathy at the collective level; that is, really listening to the *Other*. Indeed, the ear to the rail in this instance appears to be virtually non-existent.

Discussion

This warrants discussion. However, I will deliberately keep this short here, preferring to have the discussion flow more freely and from the floor in the context of an academic gathering such as this or from any eventual reader's own reflections about this issue.

Accordingly, I will focus briefly on just two key points:

- Why, in academic publishing, is English so dominant, even in such fields as modern languages and applied linguistics, where its pre-eminence constitutes a kind of paradox (and indeed, in Canada particularly, this question might well be raised also in other disciplines, such as history and politics, among possible others)?
- Why, in the grand design, does any of this make any difference?

In addressing these points, a number of issues come to mind. In the first place, while this might be debated, one line of thinking has found significant consensus around the notion that globalization across the spectrum has resulted in hegemonies. If this is the case, it is not inconceivable to think that English is now playing a hegemonic role in human discourse. Unless a hegemonic order of things is what all humans want, perhaps we need to stop and reflect more about the impact English dominance is having on other languages and whether that is troubling or a good thing. (As empires wax and wane and other empires ascend, on the heels of the Anglo-American empires, this same reflection would apply likewise to those empires' languages and the hegemonic role they assume in the world).

In hegemonic settings, the lower on the ladder become submissive; they acquiesce to what is simply because it is the widely accepted, established order. In academic publishing, Francophones and bilingual researchers highly competent in the language of Molière choose (or acquiesce?) to publish in English when writing about French immersion, for instance, even when most of their target audience works in the French language. Some have remarked that they made this choice (or have they made a real choice?) so as to reach a wider audience or so as to meet the language-of-dissemination requirements of most conferences or publications. Some have indicated that they have done so simply because they work in predominantly English-speaking settings and/or completed their graduate work in English and so publishing in English has become, unmindfully, an almost automatic reflex for them. Whatever the case, the net effect is diminution in Academe of the *Other* and, by extension, others' points of view and worldviews and how we might otherwise have been enriched by direct or indirect exposure to their differing cultural and academic

traditions. For the uninitiated, Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) has made a most compelling case about what is lost to the human community at large when a language/culture dies, is unheeded or remains unheard. Indeed, she makes the case that linguistic and cultural diversity are as necessary for the existence of our planet as biodiversity and that the two are organically inter-connected. This presenter's/author's personal experience while completing his doctoral research (1995) *en français* at Canada's foremost and oldest Francophone university, the Université Laval in Québec City, taught and transformed him through lived experience, both as person and as academic, what Skutnabb-Kangas so eloquently describes in her global research. It also helped him come to the realization that academics too are part of the main.

While coercion through legal requirement is probably not the best way to go, it is insightful to observe that Canadian universities, indirectly significantly federally financed, are not subject to the same scrutiny by Canada's Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages regarding their greater or lesser bilingual practice as are, for instance, post offices, airlines, and national parks. Were they subject to the same scrutiny, would it make a difference? At the least, this is a point to ponder.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been my purpose to present the case for linguistic-cultural diversity maintenance under the overriding rubric of sustainability education. To help me achieve that purpose, I have drawn upon theoretical and research works emanating from paradigmatic traditions centered on language education for social justice and on the maintenance of endangered languages/cultures. I have extended, convincingly I hope, the reach of these heuristic areas to include the implications of the choice of language-of-dissemination practice of academics, particularly applied linguists. In the end, academics too are part of the main. Accordingly, the mindfulness we bring (or don't) to our linguistic practice also matters.

Notes

- (1) **Ethno-linguistic vitality** refers to the probable direction a speech community will go relative to the maintenance of, or shift from, its traditional language. Language maintenance and shift are long-term consequences of consistent patterns of language choice throughout the speech community. No one factor, though several factors are identified in the pertinent literature, has become a leading indicator of linguistic vitality in a community.
- (2) **Mindfulness**, perhaps influenced by the *slow food* and *slow education* and related movements, refers to a state of being fully present in the moment, accepting each moment as it arises. It is a practice and a way of approaching life that encompasses such attitudes as acceptance, patience, non-judgment, and compassion for others and ourselves. In education, it is being fully engaged in the meaning of what we are doing, teaching and learning and with one another.
- (3) **The sample of journals** selected is outlined in detail in Heffernan (2007), including observation and analysis of over a decade of choice of language-of-dissemination practice in the Canadian Modern Language Review, Notos, Foreign Language Annals, the French Review and Hispania.

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