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Linguistic Justice Requires an Artificial Language: a Comment on van Parijs

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Abstract. In advocating the use of a global auxiliary language, Van Parijs forms part of a tradition that stretches back to the seventeenth century. However, he differs from this tradition in promoting the use of English rather than an artificial language of some sort. This paper examines the theoretical situation that van Parijs proposes as the most fair, in which English functions world-wide as the preferred auxiliary language and in which certain measures have been taken to counterbalance injustices of three types. I draw attention to injustices of each of these types done to speakers of English in that situation. This leads to the conclusion that proposals to use an artificial language as a global lingua franca that were made in the seventeenth and later centuries have a stronger case than van Parijs has argued.

Keywords: artificial languages, seventeenth-century language planners, Esperanto, injustice to Anglophones, multilingualism

1.

In welcoming a development that he believes is leading to the large-scale adoption of English as a world-wide lingua franca, van Parijs places himself in a tradition which, in the Western world, goes back as far as the seventeenth century. In this paper, I first point out that he shares with tradition his advocating the use of an auxiliary language for communication across the globe, whereas his rejection of the use of an artificial language for the purpose sets him apart from it. I then examine the linguistic situation that van Parijs proposes as the most fair, assuming that English strengthens and consolidates its position as the preferred world language. I call attention to some injustices done to speakers of English that van Parijs has not exactly overlooked but, I think, could have given more consideration to. This then leads to the conclusion that proposals to use an artificial language as a global lingua franca that were made in the seventeenth and later centuries have a stronger case than van Parijs has argued. That is to say, if

we take linguistic justice, not the current language situation as a starting point, and if we disregard the likelihood of such proposals ever to succeed.

2.

In the seventeenth century, the idea of instituting a universal language for the use of all mankind gained currency, and numerous projects were undertaken with a view to this goal. These projects were driven by a range of motives, one of which was invariably that a remedy should be sought for the 'curse of Babel,' i.e. the fact that large groups of people are unable to communicate with each other because they speak different languages. As John Wilkins, the author of an elaborate artificial language, puts it:

'He that knows how to estimate that judgment inflicted on Mankind in the Curse of the *Confusion*, with all the unhappy consequences of it, may thereby judge what great advantages and benefit there will be, in a remedy against it' (An Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language, 1668, Epistle Dedicatory).

He proposed his own creation as one such remedy. Wilkins and his contemporaries knew that in certain regions international auxiliary languages were in use, such as Malay in South-East Asia and Latin among the learned in Europe, but they did not believe that a language of that sort could reverse Babel altogether. They proposed the adoption of an artificial language, newly contrived using sound linguistic principles, for two main reasons: first, such a language would in many respects be a better language than the supposedly deficient languages that were in use and, second, it was deemed impossible to single out any of these existing languages for use as an international one as these were all, by and large, connected with particular peoples and nations, and it seemed obvious that no nation would be prepared to adopt the language of another one.

It is easy to see the parallel between Wilkins's and van Parijs's motives, both wishing to counteract the 'unhappy consequences' of language barriers and both expecting great advantages once these are overcome. In this respect, Wilkins's project as well as those of his contemporaries were a complete failure. Nevertheless, the idea continued to have some appeal, and similar projects were pursued in later centuries, mostly in the margin of mainstream intellectual history.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was a noticeable upsurge in projects for a universal language, with, first, Volapük and shortly after that Esperanto attracting a spectacular number of supporters. In comparison with the seventeenth-century projects, the goals of Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto, were more modest. He had no intention of providing a language superior to those already existing, although he purposefully observed simplicity and regularity in constructing Esperanto. He did this for the sake of making the language easy to

learn, which, in turn, served the primary purpose of inducing as many people as possible to use Esperanto as an international language. For the rest, he made no attempts to surpass existing languages with respect to logical or representational characteristics, which was a major feature of the seventeenth-century projects.

Linguistic justice was foremost among Zamenhof's motives for creating Esperanto. In the multilingual environment in which he grew up, he noticed that speakers of languages with a higher status than those spoken by others enjoyed undeserved advantages. In his view, only a newly made artificial language could neutralize this unjustified inequality. Again, a parallel with Van Parijs's concerns is obvious. However, it is also clear that van Parijs dismisses Esperanto, and implicitly all languages of this type as a viable alternative to English. I have no doubt that, given the current dynamics with respect to global language use, van Parijs is right about this. Changes in this regard have been enormous. When Wilkins put forward his plan for a universal language in English, his book was hard to access for a large number of intellectuals even in Europe, such as the philosopher Leibniz. Zamenhof first published his plan in Russian, with reasonable hopes of attracting an international readership. However, if a consideration of linguistic justice is to be more than a justification of the status quo, or an extrapolation of this to a new situation on the basis of current trends – and I think it should be more than that –, then there is reason to reconsider the case for an artificial language.

3.

Although Van Parijs proposes to embrace and stimulate rather than to obstruct the rapid spreading of English as a lingua franca, he notes that three types of injustice may follow from this development. Those who profit are the Anglophones; the losers, at least initially, are the rest of the world's population. He then shows that each type of unfairness is either not as bad as it may seem or can be effectively counterbalanced by certain measures. I do not object to any of van Parijs's claims concerning these points, which are all convincing. However, I think it may be illuminating to look again at the three types of unfairness in turn, but from the perspective of the Anglophones, for it will then turn out that certain costs and benefits are missing from the balance sheet.

First, cooperative justice. The particular unfairness on this score, as van Parijs rightly notes, is that the non-native learners of the lingua franca pay the cost of language learning, whereas the native speakers are free riders. However, the distribution of costs and benefits is not as straightforward as that. Learning a foreign language requires time and effort, but it cannot be counted exclusively as a cost. It carries considerable advantages with it: cognitive capacities are exercised and possibly enhanced and the learners enjoy a widening of their intellectual

and cultural awareness as a rich cultural heritage becomes accessible. Thus, in addition to enabling them to communicate with a larger number of people, there is an intrinsic pay-off, not just a burden for the non-native learners of English.

In principle, these benefits are also available to Anglophones, who are free to learn whichever language they fancy. But the sociolinguistic situation is not conducive to such learning. And even it if were, the fact remains that for native speakers of English the double advantage of both acquiring the lingua franca and enjoying the intrinsic benefit of language learning is not available. Furthermore, their opportunities to learn a foreign language through exposure and practice are far more limited than those of non-Anglophones, especially when the language concerned has many bilingual or multilingual speakers. For example, Anglophones trying to learn Dutch typically complain that their efforts are thwarted by the native speakers' habitually switching to English. In practice, the chances of ending up as a monolingual are much greater for Anglophones than for native speakers of other languages.

Second, distributive justice. Native speakers of English have economic advantages, for example, better opportunities on the international job market. As van Parijs notes, this advantage is bound to shrink as the lingua franca spreads more and more. One could add that non-native speakers of English frequently become sufficiently fluent in English to be little disadvantaged by their linguistic upbringing. Furthermore, they may profit from their bi- or multilingualism when it comes to acquiring jobs as translators or diplomats, and they may contrast favourably with the typical monolingual Anglophone in international contexts.

Third, parity of esteem. In order to pursue linguistic justice in this regard, van Parijs recommends that each linguistic community be granted the right to impose its own language as the medium of instruction within their territory, and to require immigrants to learn their language. It is worth noting that for Anglophones this right is vacuous for the most part, for there is a disparity in what immigrants are required to learn. If Anglophones move to another country, they are supposed, or forced, to learn a language which is, normally, unknown to them. If others move to an Anglophone country, they are required to learn a language that they, normally, already know. More importantly, native speakers of the lingua franca are robbed of the collective identity all linguistic communities but theirs are entitled to. Since the whole world is appropriating their language, Anglophones lose the sovereignty others are allowed to foster. If the situation that van Parijs foresees obtains, people across the globe will have (at least) two languages: on the one hand, their own native tongue which they can identify with and which they use for all personal and local affairs and, on the other hand, the lingua franca, which they use for international communication. The only exception to this is formed by the Anglophones: for them, the local and the global languages coincide. Linguistically speaking, they will end up as the poor of this world.

4.

The points just made have not escaped van Parijs's thoroughness. In Subchapter 3.9 of his book, he draws attention to what he calls a paradoxical corollary of the policies he advocates, namely that the Anglophones will be at a disadvantage in the longer run. But since this prospect is still a long way off, he postpones a discussion of what distributive justice will require when the prospect will be a reality until some indefinite point of time in the future. But we can see now that it will be very hard if not impossible to achieve linguistic justice in that future situation. It seems a slightly paradoxical characteristic of van Parijs's proposals, then, that he advocates policies in the name of linguistic justice that he expects will lead to injustice, adding that this is only a long-term effect which we will see about later.

It may be clear at this point why I would suggest that the earlier language planners from the seventeenth century onward were basically right in their opinion that a common language for the world cannot be any of the natural languages already in use. The practical argument for this – that people would never be willing to adopt the language of another nation as the common language – has been proven wrong. The current spreading of English is only one of many counterexamples. The argument from justice, however, put forward by Zamenhof in particular, has lost nothing of its strength. Van Parijs's analyses have brought great clarity to the discussion of these issues. They have also revealed that if a natural language becomes the lingua franca of the world, an imbalance is introduced causing multiple disadvantages and various types of injustice, affecting all language users, that is, everybody, including the native speakers of the lingua franca. All or most of these effects could in principle be avoided if everybody would retain their own native tongue for local use, and use a common language for international communication provided that this language is owned by all mankind in equal measure, which means that this must be an artificial one. But this is only in principle, and it is a thought that – as the fate of the universal language movement has shown – has just a faint effect in the real world.