

Language Equality in International Relations - The Role of China

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Literally, "international relations" means relations between countries. In documents concerning international relations there is often consideration of relations between countries, but the relations discussed hold not only between countries or governments but also between legal citizens, firms and organizations. Such relations include relations in the fields of politics, economy, culture and science. It is clear that language plays an important role in such relations. Language not only exists objectively between the subjects but also is a tool and means of realizing other relations. For that reason the language factor should not be ignored in international relations. Likewise, the language problem has to be studied within the framework of basic principles of international relations.

Chinese President Hu Jintao spoke at the Moscow Institute of International Relations on May 28, 2003. According to him the following are necessary for the sake of building a new international political and economic order:

- Promotion of democracy in international relations
- Maintenance and respect of global diversity
- Establishment of a new concept of security and mutual trust and advantage, equality and cooperation
- Acceleration of balanced development of the global economy
- Respect for and further development of the important role of the United Nations and particularly its Security Council.

We call those principles the principles of "equality, diversity and balance in international relations." In fact, they are also basic principles that the Chinese government frequently emphasizes in various forums. In this presentation those principles play a leading role in analysis of the present situation of language used in international relations and in advocacy of building of a new international order regarding language.

Unfortunately, the problem of language is insufficiently treated in works on international relations. That being the case, I am pleased to find a small chapter in a work by Henderson entitled "English as a Global Language." According to him the effectiveness and efficiency of global communication depends particularly on the English language. He asserts that English has already become the *lingua franca* of the whole world, the universal language of peoples of different languages and cultures, that a fifth of the people in the world can speak English and that many politicians and scientists are able to communicate in it fluently. He says that English is

progressively becoming the No. 1 candidate for the second language for the whole world and that English is the common language of citizens of the world. Is that the truth? Yes, the reality of the matter is that serious.

To summarize, you don't have to look too far to find inequality in international relations. Kofi Annan recently said that it is an unfortunate fact that the world today has more inequality than it had 40 years ago. He is certainly right. The present international order concerning language is characterized by inequality and imbalance. Language is mankind's most important means of communication. It plays an irreplaceable role in national economic life and in formation of the national economic system. English-speaking countries that simply use their local language advantage are able to enormously profit from it in cultural and economic terms. Such asymmetry of language development is a big obstacle to progress of mankind over the long run. Language is not just a tool. The history of spread of certain languages is a history of policies of force. If language were only a tool, there would not be so many conflicts in the world due to language differences. If language were only a tool, immigrants to North America before the founding of the United States of America would not have destroyed the Indian languages. Language is also a means of spreading culture, and it is also a means of profiting. If it were not, they wouldn't say that Britain's "black gold" is North Sea oil, but rather that it is really the English language. That shows that the language order based on English is in contradiction with the principles of equality, diversity and balance in international relations. That being the case, it is urgently required that politicians, linguists and scientists of various disciplines study how to build a new international order regarding language based on equality and other basic principles.

Language inequality in international relations also causes inequality in other relations, among which inequality in cultural exchange should be noted. Statistics show that in 2002 China imported the copyrights of 8,782 publications of other countries, the United States and the U.K. accounting for 4,544 and 1,821 of them, respectively. In the same year China exported a mere 190 copyrights to other countries, 9 of them to the United States and 6 to the U.K. That fact shows that those two countries are not very interested in Chinese attainments. There is great imbalance in cultural exchange between China and English-speaking countries. Particularly disturbing to us is that the imbalance continues to grow. According to statistics of the Beijing Municipality 3,536 copyrights were imported in 2002, and in the following year the number rose to 4,640. Just today I read in the newspapers that many well-known Chinese writers are calling for efforts to save the Chinese language, and the writer Yu Guangzhong says the English is just a means of keeping in touch with the rest of the world, whereas Chinese is our roots.

Language is a collective commodity. That means that "the more the users, the greater the exchange value." In other words, the more speakers of the language there are, the greater the communicative value it has for the individual speaker. That also enhances its cultural value as a commodity. Its high value entices more people to learn it, and that positive feedback has a snowballing effect.

It is possible to classify a language into the following levels according to field of use and social function: ethnic language, common official language, regional common international language and international language. Study shows that mankind's language system has a "star" structure. At each level of the system there is one language that functions as an "interlanguage." Those interlanguages play the mentioned roles: common official language, regional common language and international language. Theoretically it is not linguistic characteristics that decide which languages play the lead role at each level, but rather economic and political factors.

The elements of the language system, i.e. the different languages, are not equal. Such inequality between them results in inequality between their respective speakers. It is clear that if all interlanguages were ethnic languages, some people in the world could communicate on each level only by means of their mother tongues. But there are also those who have to learn even three other languages in order to accomplish the same task! Structurally such a system is unstable and fragile. For the sake of improving the quality of the system we can convert the star structure to a distributed structure. Here it is a matter of how to do away with "level" in the system so as to make communication between all languages possible. That is doubtlessly impossible because no one can be expected to have a command of 6,000 languages or more! Another possible method would be that of "compacting" the levels in the system. That means that everyone would have to be able to speak two languages, his mother tongue and a common language. In that way a universal dual-language system would be built.

From the viewpoint of complete equality everyone would have to learn another language besides his mother tongue, a common language. Only subject to that condition is it possible to attain complete equality and universal bilingualism. Certainly, the common language that everyone would have to learn would not be the mother tongue of anyone in the world. Otherwise, the principle would fall apart. The required language can only be a neutral language. That idea was proposed to the League of Nations back in 1920. It is now time to implement it.

Presently the English language plays the role of such a common language. Maybe the system is effective and practical, but it certainly is neither characterized by equality nor ideal because it has within it the many problems just mentioned. One can oppose English as the common language because it is not neutral but also because of the fact that a very powerful country lies behind it. The history of that giant of a country is a cause for concern: It favors with respect to the peoples of the whole world a process that the American Indians have already been subjected to: assimilation. Some scholars think that if those who speak "powerful" languages could monetarily compensate the cost of learning them by those who speak "weak" languages, the system would be acceptable. But reality tells us that English has already become and is becoming increasingly a tree on which money grows and will continue to become increasingly so. In such a situation if you think that they are going to pay for that, you are dreaming! More frightening, just about all of the peoples of the whole world are actively getting in line to become part of the English

snowball. And the bigger the snowball gets, the wider the gap of inequality gets. But if diversity is fundamentally necessary to mankind and if unity is viable only in diversity, no unity can last without diversity. In other words, the enormous snowball is also pregnant with enormous danger.

But if English and other ethnic languages are not suitable as a common language for the whole world, how can the growing need for communication between peoples of different languages be met?

The only solution that is at least theoretically not problematic is adoption of a neutral planned language as the common language for the world. That idea may not yield much profit in the near future, but it is of value and necessary for mankind's ongoing stable development. Because of that we have to look through the possibilities regarding the building of a new order as regards an interlanguage or interlanguages, even if it is still only an ideal. In such a new order people of different languages would be able to communicate with one another on an entirely equal footing. It would not only preserve the diversity of languages and cultures and respect the human rights of all peoples regarding language but would also be useful in terms of accelerating balanced development of the global economy.

To be sure, the planned-language solution is not without problems. But they can be solved. At least we now know that the problems can be solved and that the solution is rational, that it can meet all of the conditions required by the problems. That is because the solution is in consonance with the fundamental principles of equality, diversity and balance in international relations. In other words, there is a language movement of the following description:

It is a movement for democratic communication, a movement for effective language instruction, a movement for provision of a dual-language opportunity, a movement for language rights and a movement for language diversity.

That movement is the Esperanto movement.

The fundamental principles of international relations proposed by the Chinese government can suitably be applied in building of a new interlanguage order within the broader framework of a new order of international relations, and that suggests that China will play an important role in building a new interlanguage order.

According to the Chinese National Statistics Bureau in 2003 the numbers of students in China were as follows: postgraduate students 651,000; undergraduate students 11,086,000; technical high school students 12,402,000; high school students 19,648,000; and middle school students 66,906,000, of which 22,201,000 in their first year. In the Chinese educational system students generally first receive foreign language instruction in middle school. Today the foreign language is almost always English. An impressive statistic is the figure of 20 million students starting to learn English in middle school each year. That is just the beginning of a long road ahead for them. They absolutely must acquire a working knowledge of English along the way in order to get a PhD. Another impressive figure: 100 million students learning English at one level or another in the Chinese educational system at any particular time. I consider that a big strength as regards the need to build a new interlanguage

order, but it is necessary to work out a more rational redistribution of limited resources.

According to the formula for calculation of the communicative value (K) of language mentioned by De Swaan (2003), the K-value of a language is the product of two numbers: P and C. Here P is the prevalue of the language; it stands for the percentage of the total world population that are fluent speakers of it. C is the language's value as a common interlanguage; it stands for the percentage of the speakers of the language that have a command of more than one language. It is a generally appreciated fact that bi- and multilinguals connect the multilanguage world into a whole. That being the case, C also expresses the connecting capacity of the language. It is clear that the C value of English is enormously greater than that of Chinese or of any other language. We Chinese ourselves contribute to the strength of English!

It is easy to see that those three language in the same system are closely interrelated. Chinese has a stupendous P, but that factor is now contributing to making English even stronger. It is therefore urgently necessary to redistribute resources, that being a precondition for making a big contribution to a new interlanguage order.

China is a good model of protection of languages and language rights of minorities as an important part of human rights. In the Chinese constitution and other Chinese laws it is clearly declared that all ethnic groups have the right to freely use and develop their own language. The administrations of minority regions have the right to use their own language as a working language. What is even more important, in schools and courses with mainly minority students the government encourages use of textbooks in the minority language for instruction.

The Chinese government supports the Esperanto movement because Esperanto has made and makes a useful contribution to Chinese national liberation, to the Chinese new culture movement and to cultural communication between China and other countries. The Chinese linguist Chen Yuan has said that spread of Esperanto in China is closely linked with reform of society in this country and that that sustains the Chinese Esperanto movement. He is certainly right about that.

In 1963 the Chinese Ministry of Education proposed Esperanto as an optional second foreign language for foreign language majors in universities, and in 1982 it declared again that Esperanto can figure as a second foreign language in many fields. If China shares such good experience with the whole world, that will doubtlessly help to build a new interlanguage order.

To be sure, it would be better if we would do the following:

1. Preserve the present place of Chinese in international organizations and relations and work for enhancement of its position. Value and love our mother tongue because self-esteem is a precondition for gaining the respect of others. If China were to join in the English snowball with all of its people, that would send the K-value of English soaring astronomically, in which case you can forget about building any new order: it's a cinch that English would then rule the world.

2. It is necessary to beef up the K-value of Chinese by supporting learning and instruction of Chinese as a foreign language throughout the world. Statistics put the present number of people learning Chinese as a foreign language at 25 million. Plans call for raising that to 100 million in the next 5 years. It is important to make sure that such activity not become a movement to establish another extremely powerful language that could erode other languages. We are aiming at another method for stabilizing the world's language system if you remember that we as yet still have only one interlanguage on the international level of the language system.

3. As I just mentioned, there will be 20 million middle school children in China this year starting to take classes in English. That not only raises the K-value of English but also lowers that of Chinese and that of Esperanto. If foreigners are able to communicate well in English in China, why should they bother to learn Chinese? That being the case, China must urgently work out a policy concerning foreign language instruction in order to avoid unnecessary investment in learning of English and limit the expansion of English.

4. It is necessary to intensify instruction of other foreign languages so as to stem the tide toward English and turn it away from it. That will not only lower the K-value of English but also raise that of other languages, making the system more stable and also contributing to language diversity in the world.

5. It would be a good idea to introduce Esperanto into all levels of the Chinese educational system. Studies have shown that learning Esperanto facilitates subsequent learning of other languages. If all or a part of the 20 million students that start middle school each year were to receive instruction in Esperanto, it could prove to be interesting to them because of its simplicity and could mean better results than those obtained so far with English. Learning of other foreign languages, including English, could be postponed until later, in high school, when students could choose the language they want to learn. Since they would already have a basic knowledge of Esperanto, it is to be expected that they would be able to learn the other languages better than if that were not the case, including better than they have learned English up to now. At the university level the main aim of foreign language instruction is reinforcement of ability to understand English special languages to facilitate reading of technical literature. It is recommendable that students attain an active command of Esperanto and a passive command of English. That would make it possible to reduce the time that has to be devoted to learning foreign languages so as to have more time to acquire specialized knowledge. That presupposes:

- Establishment of an Esperanto department in universities to train teachers and scientists. The goal should be acquisition of a fluent command. That is important in order to be able to implement Phillipson's proposal that Esperanto be used in international organizations as an internal language and as an interlanguage in conference interpretation (the language of the "main interpretation booth").
- Establishment of research organizations for esperantology and interlinguistics for delivery of theoretical nutrition and energy to practitioners.

- Giving Esperanto a place in the educational system on a par with or even above other foreign languages.
- Support to publication of various documents and specialized and technical publications in Esperanto.

6. Education is basic to any activity and the key to building a new interlanguage order. If and when we someday have a sufficient quantity of speakers of Esperanto, i.e. when Esperanto has a significant K-value, then we should strongly speak out for adoption of Esperanto as the language of international relations.

Through such efforts we raise the K-values of Chinese and Esperanto while at the same time lowering that of English and making it possible to leave more time to students for acquisition of specialized knowledge.

Eighty-three years ago Dr. Nitobe Inazô, then Assistant Secretary General of the League of Nations, set Esperanto on the long road to international relations upon return from the 13th Universal Congress of Esperanto (Prague, 1921). Fifty years ago UNESCO passed a resolution recognizing the value of Esperanto to mankind. Today the world needs Esperanto more than ever, at least theoretically.

China today already fully appreciates the importance of equality, diversity and balance in international relations. The idea of a new interlanguage order, too, is based on exactly those same three principles. It can therefore be considered an integral part of the new order of international relations.

If the language problem continues to be ignored in international relations, what awaits us is the world dominion of English. Is that really the new world, the new order, that the peoples and statesmen of the world are longing for?

(Translated from Esperanto by Mihaelo Sedgley)