



DISCUSSION ON SOCIOLINGUISTIC TRENDS ACROSS THE WORLD

Arranged by Grigory Kazakov

For this special issue of the journal featuring polyglottery and sociolinguistics, the editorial board contacted several experts in this field from different corners of the world asking them to share their vision of the current trends and issues in the social use of language both locally and globally with a particular emphasis on language policy and education. The participants who kindly responded to this invitation were:

- Hikaru Kitabayashi, PhD, Co-President of the American Society of Geolinguistics, Professor Emeritus of Daito Bunka University, Tokyo;
- Seán Ó Riain, PhD, President of European Esperanto Union, Multilingualism Officer at the Department of Foreign Affairs of Ireland, Dublin;
- Aita Bishowkarma, PhD, President of the Geolinguistics Society of Nepal, faculty member at the Department of English, Campus of International Languages, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu;
- Kathleen Heugh, PhD, Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at UniSA Education Futures, University of South Australia, Adelaide.

The results of this written exchange of ideas are presented in the form of a round table discussion below in the hope that it will provide food for thought and inspiration for further research.

1. What are the major language trends in your country (region, part of the world)?

– *Hikaru Kitabayashi*: In Japan, there seems to be a trend for language variants that have a dialectical relationship with Standard Japanese to gradually slip into ever greater disuse. On the other hand, due to population decline, labor is being brought to Japan from an ever-greater range of countries, resulting in more languages in actual use than before. Concerning language education, foreign language education continues to focus overwhelmingly on American English.

– *Seán Ó Riain*: In Ireland, the major trend is the continuing struggle to prevent the disappearance of Irish as a community language. The Official Languages (Amendment) Act, 2021, considerably strengthens state support for the Irish language. One of its provisions stipulates that by 2030 at least 20% of new recruits to the public service must be fluent in Irish. A further provision of this Act, which comes into force on October 10, 2022, is that all government ministries and other public bodies are obliged to spend at least 20% of their advertising budgets on advertising in Irish, and at least 5% of their advertising budgets on advertising in the Irish language media. For the purposes of the Act, “advertising” covers “all communication directed at the general public”. Irish became one of the EU’s 24 official languages on January 1, 2007. A derogation, which prevented full translation of all EU texts into Irish, was removed

on December 31, 2021. Thus, Irish is now on a par with the other EU official languages, and 200–250 translators and interpreters work for the EU institutions in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg. This opens up a career path for those who are highly skilled in Irish, and considerably adds to the prestige of the language.

– *Aita Bishowkarma*: In the context of South Asian countries, linguistic colonialism has still been working actively as a fashion of modernization and westernization. Basically, languages of developed and powerful countries have been used as the source languages. Rapid spread of English is one of the examples. Similarly, Hindi and Urdu or Tamil languages are thought to be sources of knowledge. Actually, South Asian countries are a hub of multilingualism. However, only few languages are emphasized by power holders. As a result, many minority languages are on the verge of extinction. In the name of privatization and modernization, English has been assumed as the medium of quality education. In the case of Nepal, 123 plus 6 languages from four language families (viz. the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan, the Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-European, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian as well as a language isolate called Kusunda) are spoken in the country. Nepali is the medium of instruction whereas English has been used as a second or foreign language. Almost all the institutional schools use English as the medium of instruction. As a result, large numbers of children from indigenous and minority communities are deprived of education in their own mother tongue.

– *Kathleen Heugh*: Currently, concerns and interest in language issues in Australia relate to the languages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, on the one hand, and languages of migrant communities, often called “community languages”, on the other hand. While there has been media coverage of UNESCO’s International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), thus far the responses from state and federal governments have been slow. The latest 2021 Census data indicate that 167 Aboriginal languages are spoken by the 812,000 people who identify as Aboriginal (3.2% of the population). In-migration to Australia is also changing the cultural and linguistic ecology of the country. Currently, 22.3% of people use a language different from English at home, and 51% of people were either born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas. So, on the one hand, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are endangered or close to extinction, and on the other hand, growing in-migration is increasing the linguistic diversity of communities in the country. These matters are increasingly coming into focus in relation to the monolingual systems, including in education, with implications for student inclusion and often exclusion owing to a mismatch between community language and the language of the school.

2. What challenges in the field of language is society facing?

– *Hikaru Kitabayashi*: The sudden rise of a new multipolar political and economic world order demands a shift to multilingual educational policies. The wounded pride of English-speaking countries will hamper this process in those areas of the world that are English-speaking. Likewise, but to a rather lesser extent, it is unlikely that, over the short to medium term, foreign language education policies of certain EU and/or NATO countries will adapt to the new world order as quickly as would be desirable in a more ideally organized world.

– *Seán Ó Riain*: The biggest challenge in Ireland is that of preventing a world language, English, from killing the Irish language. As all Irish people understand English, and many do not understand Irish, it is considered rude by some to speak Irish in the presence of those who do not understand Irish. The holders of this view sometimes express support for Irish, but do not appear to understand that their view of “politeness” would effectively mean that Irish could never be used in public. In Ireland, there are nearly always people present who do not understand it, so a change in the understanding of “politeness” is necessary for the “normalisation” of the use of Irish in society.

– *Aita Bishowkarma*: South Asian countries are rich in diverse cultures, languages, ethnicities and ecological zones. The major challenges are using foreign languages as media of instruction and as official languages as well as emphasizing only the “rich” languages. This results in the depletion of local indigenous languages. Many of the Nepalese indigenous languages have an oral tradition, which deserves to

be developed. These languages are not in priority. Neoliberal ideology, in the name of modernism, gives less priority to the indigenous languages. Open market, free trade, e-commerce, digital currency, use of computers, the Internet and ICT in academia – all empowers English rather than minority and indigenous languages. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were physically closed and online classes were the only alternative for students. Research by Education Review Office under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (Nepal) showed that only 32% of school children had access to mobile or Internet facilities. The rest of the children did not have such equipment/devices. Furthermore, these devices function in English, and not in the indigenous languages. Language is not only a medium of communication but it also concerns the culture, costumes, values and belief system of people overall. The disappearance of their language means losing their identity, culture, and social values and norms.

– *Kathleen Heugh*: A significant challenge relates to the monolingual English language education system, which has not been sufficiently sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These are especially those who live in remote parts of the country and where Aboriginal people seldom hear English spoken outside of the school. Whereas bilingual education in the students' first language and English had been practiced in earlier years, this has been discontinued in most states within the country for several decades. The monolingual English language education system is also a challenge for students from migrant families with home languages that are different from English. The issue becomes obvious when annual system-wide literacy and numeracy assessments are conducted for students in their 3rd, 5th, 7th and 9th grades. Aboriginal students achieve the lowest scores in these assessments, followed by students whose families have migrated because of conflict and displacement from their places of origin. The high-stakes assessment results have negative effects on students' self-esteem and often lead to disengagement from education with the potential for social alienation.

3. How (well) does language education respond to these developments?

– *Hikaru Kitabayashi*: Though the spectacular success already achieved by the Russian Federation in creating a multipolar world order, over the short term, will continue to breed envy and hatred among the collective West, over the long term the successful are those whose systems of government and education will be copied, even by their most bitter rivals. The Russian Federation and China, its most important ally in this new scheme of things, should already be preparing for an increased interest in their languages now and should be working with educational authorities in other important language centers of the new world order to coordinate in a mutually beneficial way the development of other national languages of other emerging power centers in the context of foreign language education. In these developments, geolinguistics and geolinguistic ethnography have much to offer in terms of helping foreign language education policy makers throughout the world reach optimal solutions to the language issues that will surely be facing them.

– *Seán Ó Riain*: It responds relatively well in teaching Irish to an English-speaking population. It responds far less well in teaching tolerance. Non-speakers in Ireland need to learn that the fact that they do not understand Irish cannot be used to prevent Irish speakers from using their language in public. The Irish-medium schools, called *Gaelscoileanna*, are entirely voluntary, in response to demand from parents, and teach all subjects through Irish except English. They have grown from 2% of the total in 1975 to some 8% at present, and actually 10% at the level of primary schools. The Irish Government policy to promote Irish means that Irish-medium schools are allocated one teacher more than schools teaching through English. For example, if a primary school has 100 pupils and teaches through English, it will have four teachers. If the same school decides to teach through Irish, it will be allocated five teachers. Educational results are better in all subjects in *Gaelscoileanna* than in the English-medium schools, and this is clearly adding to their popularity. Teaching Irish in the educational system, in general, is quite good, but it is made more difficult by the dominance of English in Irish society, and the lack of a "public space" where the use of Irish is acceptable, and even expected.

– *Aita Bishowkarma*: Nepal had a monolingual policy prior to 1990 during the Panchayat system. In 1961, the National System of Education was introduced to promote the use of only Nepali in admin-

istration, education and the media with the slogan “one language, one nation” despite the multilingual situation in the country. The Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007) recognized all the languages spoken in Nepal as national languages, which confirmed the right of each community residing in Nepal to preserve and promote their language. This Constitution also declared the right of each community to get basic education in their mother tongue as provisioned in the law. Eventually, the Constitution of Nepal promulgated in 2015 has clearly stated that all languages spoken as the mother tongues in Nepal are the languages of the nation. Nepali is the official language of Nepal. At the same time, by law, language communities have the right to educate their children in their mother tongue. The law opens the door for multilingual education and mother tongue based education in Nepal. However, this has become ineffective as the government has not allocated sufficient policy measures and budget for mother tongue based education for indigenous and minority children.

– *Kathleen Heugh*: Thus far, neither the state nor federal education authorities have fully accepted the need to shift from a monolingual education system in English to one that accepts the large body of research in other parts of the world that supports bilingual and/or multilingual education systems. This is equally important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students who have migrated because of forced displacement, conflict and/or other circumstances of hardship. There are, of course, many small-scale initiatives but these have not been taken up in mainstream teacher education programmes and in official curriculum and assessment policies.

4. What kind of language policy do you consider necessary at the present stage?

– *Hikaru Kitabayashi*: This, I think, depends on the country. The Russian Federation might consider promoting Chinese and Hindi more and might consider early soft power enhancement efforts in promoting key African languages and not former colonial languages still used there on an official basis. China, of course, should put much more emphasis on Russian and Hindi, though in the multipolar world order we have now shifted into, it would not be desirable to ignore French, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Farsi, and Arabic. English, of course, will remain important, but there are already more than enough Chinese with excellent English. Other countries would do well to adapt their foreign language education policies accordingly, though, as it will take time for English-speaking countries to clearly recognize the ongoing collapse of American power, I foresee that English-speaking countries, will eventually (probably 10 to 15 years from now) make the changes they need to make to their foreign language educational curricula.

– *Seán Ó Riain*: There is a need in Ireland to plan occasions to use Irish, and not just to teach the language. This effectively means voluntary agreement on excluding English on certain occasions, because, if both languages are acceptable on all occasions, and if English is understood by everybody and Irish is not, this will inevitably lead to the use of English alone. For example, in Ireland’s democratically elected parliament, Dáil Éireann, about 20% of deputies are bilingual, in that they speak Irish fluently. However, in 2018, a mere 0.5% of parliamentary debates took place in Irish. An aim of the present legislation, referred to above, is to increase the use of Irish to 5%. That still appears tiny, but it would mean that 10 times as much Irish would be used than at present. The only way to change this is voluntary agreement between the political parties (which could be easily achieved, as all parties support the Irish language) on a period of, say, 30 minutes per week, say, every Wednesday from 3.30 pm to 4 pm, during which all contributions must be in Irish. Those deputies unable to speak Irish, and wishing to contribute at this time, should have an Irish-speaking civil servant assigned to them, to translate their comments into Irish.

– *Aita Bishowkarma*: In the context of Nepal, the right to use one’s mother tongue in schools would promote the linguistic identities of all students including minorities and indigenous groups. Likewise, equal treatment of all learners from different linguistic backgrounds at school, participatory management of the system and emphasis on more democratic school practices and curriculum content would support the country’s linguistic diversity. The recognition of this diversity in the classroom should reflect the multilingual character of the Nepalese society as students represent their identities through their mother tongues. Emphasizing English as a foreign language, and Nepali as the national language, hinders the de-

velopment of indigenous and minority languages in Nepal. The constitutional provision of mother tongue based multilingual education deserves to be implemented at least up to the primary level. Language and cultural heritages of diverse ethnic minorities and indigenous tribes are vast resources of Nepal, which deserve preservation, protection and promotion.

– *Kathleen Heugh*: If governments wish to provide quality education that includes most students, then they will need to commit to and deliver bilingual or multilingual approaches within mainstream education. High-level attainment in the main language of the country or education system must be a principal goal alongside a bi-/multilingual pedagogies that ensure that the home language is used as the necessary foundation that leads to learning the official/main language of the school. Students who come from minority language backgrounds are seldom able to reach this goal without being provided home language instruction and teaching and where the teachers understand how to use multilingual pedagogies that allow students to make use of their home languages to learn the curriculum. These pedagogies can include purposeful translanguaging, i.e. the linguistic and cognitive two-way exchanges of communication where languages are in contact (e.g. the classroom). They do, however, need to ensure that students reach high-level capability in the main language of the society to open doors to higher education and career opportunities. Bilingual and/or multilingual education does not exclude these opportunities; rather, they enhance the likelihood that students can succeed.

5. How do you envision the sociolinguistic situation in the world in the foreseeable future?

– *Hikaru Kitabayashi*: Due to recent events in the political and economic sphere, it is clear that the world has already made a dramatic shift from unipolarity to multipolarity. It seems inevitable that English will decline in importance, as Russian, Chinese, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Farsi, Hindi, Arabic and Turkish will grow in importance. Over the next 20 years, I project Russian and Chinese as growing the most in terms of foreign language acquisition interest shown by other language speakers. Afterwards, I would expect rather more interest in Hindi, and over the long term, I would expect attention to be increasingly focused on African languages such as Yoruba, Hausa, or Swahili.

– *Seán Ó Riain*: There is a need for a real international language, such as Esperanto, to replace the current hegemonic use of English. The latter gives unjust, unearned and lifelong privileges to native speakers of English, about 6% of the human race, while placing 94% of humanity in an unjust, unmerited and lifelong position of inferiority. This does not, of course, apply, to the small percentage of people, about 15–20%, who are able to learn to speak a second language as well as they speak their mother tongue. It only applies to the other 80–85% of humanity, the huge majority. Such a language can favour multilingualism, as it can improve and accelerate language learning in general. The Multilingual Accelerator method based on Esperanto was the most widely supported proposal in the educational area by European citizens in the digital platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe¹. Intriguingly, this proposal, despite its popularity, was not mentioned among the recommendations of the final report of the Conference. Seriously considering a role for Esperanto appears to be as much a taboo as was discussing the market economy in the former Soviet Union.

– *Aita Bishowkarma*: Language is a powerful tool, which plays a key role in constructing and maintaining distinct human identities. When minority language speakers try to speak their language in schools and communities, they often encounter resistance from the majority. This undermines the ability of the minority language to function in public or official contexts. The 123 languages spoken in Nepal all deserve to be preserved and protected for the sake of linguistic diversity. There are many languages, which are on the verge of extinction in the country due to a lack of government effort in terms of planning and policymaking. In the global context, the rapid spread of colonial languages like English, French, Spanish,

¹ The EU needs improved language learning. Conference on the Future of Europe, futureu.europa.eu/processes/Education/f/36/proposals/23893 (accessed 21 September 2022)

Chinese, Russian and German has been a serious threat to indigenous and minority languages. Europeans have already started to preserve their indigenous languages. Asian countries should also show serious concern about preserving, protecting and promoting their indigenous and minority languages. Languages are the intangible heritage of mankind. Majority languages are promoted by the power holders, resulting in the extinction of many minority languages in the world. Majority languages have also been the tools of extending the legacy of colonialism in the third world countries, which has brought about many conflicts. As a result, in the next century, there may be only about one thousand languages left in the world even though currently there are said to be about six thousand. Geolinguistics can address these conflicts with a solution-oriented approach to empower the people of the world in safeguarding their linguistic rights.

– *Kathleen Heugh*: Human mobility (physical and virtual) will continue to increase linguistic and other diversities. It is essential for all education systems to future-proof the present generation of students so that they have the linguistic and knowledge diversities to meet the changing circumstances that we currently experience and anticipate. In this we may assume increasing concerns with climate change, conflict and changing global power blocs will alter the ways in which people need to have access to more languages and linguistic expertise than ever before. This means that bilingual and multilingual education is not only for minority or migrant students; rather, it should be a necessity and priority for all students in every education system of the world.