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**UNESCOCAT**

## LINGUAPAX AWARD 2010

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### *Speech of Robert Phillipson*

It is encouraging that Catalan efforts to promote linguistic justice are supported by world opinion-leaders: the Dalai Lama: 'All language communities have the right to preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage'; Nelson Mandela: 'The ideal of formulating linguistic human rights is indeed a magnificent undertaking and also long overdue'. But even if words are 'the most powerful drug used by mankind' (Rudyard Kipling), we, especially academics, need to remember that 'Words are no deeds', as a character in one of Shakespeare's plays puts it. So that while noble ideals need to be put into words – which both Professor Siguan and I have done in book form, so as to attempt to move European language policy forward and strengthen linguistic diversity – the goals of linguistic justice and peace, locally and globally, can only be achieved through action. Linguistic injustice is invariably connected to lack of political and economic power. The challenges are therefore immense. I am grateful to UNESCO Linguapax for their continuing efforts to highlight how language policy can contribute to achieving peace worldwide. I am honoured to be a small part of this process.

My professional career in language teaching and language policy is coming full circle today – though hopefully an ever-expanding circle. In 1964, fresh from Cambridge University, where I studied French, German and law, I found myself in the service of the British Council. This is the British government's career service to promote British interests worldwide, largely through English teaching. The Instituto Cervantes functions in a similar way, I assume. After a month learning Spanish in London, I was given teacher training at the British Institute in Madrid by a single elderly colonial British character, and soon found myself inflicted on classes of Spanish schoolchildren. They were very tolerant of my efforts to animate behaviourist, monolingual, pseudo-communicative teaching. I learned a lot – not least by realizing how under-qualified I was – whereas I doubt whether the school kids learned much. I have to confess that I then had little awareness of why English was a dominant language internationally. It was merely part of my unquestioned British imperial background.

I have made sure that my later work on linguistic imperialism, language rights, and language policy has been grounded in a solid historical perspective, and is multi-disciplinary scholarship. Over 21 million people from the United Kingdom emigrated between 1815 and 1915. The majority went to the United States, others to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and rather fewer to South Africa, taking English with them. The colonial empire – India, many parts of Africa and elsewhere – was an additional global empire project that also entailed the transportation of English. The British Council (which I left in 1973) was established in the 1930s to copy what the fascist

governments in Germany and Italy were doing. They had shown how cultural propaganda could effectively promote national interests abroad. British collaboration with fascist Spain in the 1960s, my first exposure to Spain, fits with George Orwell's diagnosis of British complicity with fascism during the Spanish civil war. He saw this as a class war, from the inside as a soldier in Catalunya, and as a commentator on the decisive role of military fire power, and the cynical ruthlessness of the economically powerful. It intensified his awareness of fraud and brain-washing in the mass media, and of the tragic gap between ideals and harsh realities. Establishing democratic societies that respect diversity, including linguistic diversity, is an incomplete project in most parts of the world.

Some of the most lucid analysis of the Western mentality that has led Europeans to colonise the rest of the world has been undertaken by the colonised, by Frantz Fanon, a black psychiatrist from the Caribbean who experienced French colonialism and racism and the Algerian liberation war (I worked in Algeria from 1965-68), and Ashis Nandy, an Indian polymath with a training in clinical psychology. He is one of many brilliant Indian scholars, some of whom I have had the privilege of working with on multilingual education and language policy issues. Meticulous studies show that colonialism harmed the colonizers, especially the British and French, just as deeply as it traumatised the colonised peoples of Africa, Asia, Australasia and the Americas. This pathological Western mindset has reached its most extreme form in the ruling circles of the United States of America with its belief that a Christian God has called on them to impose their values worldwide, by military means whenever necessary. This has been incessant since 1945. American scholars refer to the USA as a warfare society rather than a welfare society. The British are generally in support - think of Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair. There is an annual European Union-USA summit that coordinates economic and foreign policy - which means that our governments in effect do what the US demands. Most of the EU's commissioners have had part of their education in the USA. We are imposing our values, our social and economic system, and our languages on other peoples. This mindset is just as much a problem in the neoliberal, neoimperial world of today as it was in earlier centuries; there are merely differences due to new forms of corporate rapacity and technology, different ways of imposing and legitimating injustice, new ways of massaging public opinion that George Orwell experienced so strongly in Catalunya and then converted into memorable creative writing. We have moved on from *Animal Farm*, 'all animals are equal', to the equally fraudulent 'all languages are equal'. The Newspeak of 1984 is now the upside down world of Bush and Obama's 'freedom' and 'democracy'.

So the same problems and challenges exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The fate of the world's languages is being largely determined by strong corporate interests. Neither governments nor the EU accord a high priority to language policy. Many of the Linguapax award holders that have had a strong influence on my own academic and personal development - Joshua Fishman, Neville Alexander, and especially Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, my wife and frequent co-author – have generated not only words on plurilingualism but also action to contribute to a more just world.

So is English problem number one? Of course not, there is nothing intrinsic to any language that means that it can serve only evil purposes. Language policy can be influenced, as the Catalans know only too well. I am not 'against' English, functioning as I do on a daily basis in four languages. What I am against is the uses to which English is put in many contexts, both in industrialised societies and in the postcolonial world. English is put to evil purposes by the US government, whereas there are countless brilliant American citizens, among them many academics, including scholars

working in the area of language policy, who are working for a more just world, and whose efforts inform my analysis.

There are also many encouraging developments. Tove and I have experienced how mother-tongue based multilingual education is being developed in India, in Nepal, in parts of Africa. In Mauritius there is a changed perception of how a creole language can function well in basic literacy acquisition, as well as being used in conducting government business. The African Academy of Languages now plays a key role in promoting diversity. In the far north of Europe, Saami language rights are increasingly respected, with education through some of the Saami languages from the kindergarten up to and including one university. The Nordic governments are committed to ensuring that an increased use of English should not be at the expense of Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, or Swedish. Explicit proactive language policy measures should ensure that there is a healthy balance between maintaining local languages for all local purposes, and developing proficiency in international languages for other purposes. There is unfortunately an excessive focus on English in the Nordic countries, as indeed throughout all of Europe, as though it is the only lingua franca, the only language needed for international purposes, which is, of course, nonsense. This false belief reflects ignorance on the part of many decision-makers about the realities and the complexity of language policy issues. As a result there has been a reduction in many countries in the learning of other major foreign languages that is worrying and short-sighted. Quite apart from the continuing neglect of immigrant minority languages.

This development is partly triggered by the way the European Union functions, with a massive gap between its rhetorical endorsement of multilingualism and the way EU policies in effect strengthen a hierarchy of languages with English now – earlier it was French – at the top. It was a Spanish translator at the EU, when I was doing fieldwork for my book on European language policies, who told me, with a twinkle in his eye, that even if the EU produces documents in all the official languages, now 23, the texts are all ‘thinly disguised French’. Well now they are nearly all undisguised English. Approval of the use of Basque, Catalan/Valencian, Irish Gaelic, and Welsh in certain contexts is a small step in the right direction. English has become the default lingua franca in the internal operations of EU institutions and in drafting EU texts. Possibly Antonio de Nebrija would approve of this example of the language of power becoming normative and hegemonic. It is an intriguing development from Rivarol's 18<sup>th</sup> century dogma: ‘ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français’, merely the language of unimportant neighbouring countries. Such mantras have little to do with maintaining linguistic diversity, and were never intended to achieve anything other than a consolidation of the power of speakers of the dominant language of the time.

Even if language policy is integral to all EU activities, language issues are so politically sensitive that they are seldom addressed in an explicit way. Ana Palacio did call, as foreign minister, in *El País* for language policy issues to be addressed, but whether this was just for home consumption rather than something the Spanish government acted on in the EU you probably know more about than me. When multilingualism is in focus, as it was when the European Parliament assessed the latest Commission initiative, proposals for strengthening language policy formation were sabotaged by linguistic nationalists. They resist the acknowledgement of minority language rights, in the EU system as elsewhere. The EU has commissioned some relevant research and development activities, but such work takes time, and may or may not be in dialogue with decision-makers and funders and lead to action. The interface between academics and politicians is weak in many European countries. And since EU institutions are inconsistent in living up to their own principles for the equitable

management of multilingualism, and there is no eurocrat cadre of well qualified specialists in language policy, many of their 'Actions' are strengthening English at the expense of other languages. So increased efforts to change this situation are needed.

Let me conclude with some profound thoughts from Paolo Freire:

To the extent that we become capable of transforming the world, of naming our own surroundings, of apprehending, of making sense of things, of deciding, of choosing, of valuing, and finally, of *ethicizing* the world, our mobility within it and through history necessarily comes to involve *dreams* toward whose realization we struggle. Thus, it follows that our presence in the world, which implies choice and decision, is not a neutral presence.

Acknowledging and building on linguistic diversity can contribute to peace in this way. Our combined efforts are needed. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you.

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