



**"...A Policy Which Favours The Language Of A Former Colonial Or Imperial Power."**

### **POST-IMPERIALIST LANGUAGE SITUATIONS: THE BALTIC STATES**

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"Pour your pitcher of wine into the wide river  
And where is the wine? There is only the river..."  
Oodgeroo Noonuccal ("Kath Walker") - Australian Aboriginal poet

In the draft Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights of 1996, the issue of colonisation is seen as relevant to language policies. One of the preamble considerations reads:

"Considering that invasion, colonization, occupation and other instances of political, economic or social subordination often involve the direct imposition of a foreign language or, at the very least, distort perceptions of the value of languages and give rise to hierarchical linguistic attitudes which undermine the language loyalty of speakers; and considering that the languages of some peoples which have attained sovereignty are immersed in a process of language substitution as a result of a policy which favours the language of a former colonial or imperial power..."

Yet nowhere further in the Declaration is this insight employed. While much has been written about linguistic imperialism and the battle for language rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson 1994, Kontra et al 1999), the link between decolonisation and necessary language policy needs to be more explicitly addressed. Moreover, some language policies now urged upon newly independent countries emerging from empires seem paradoxically to reinforce the previously imperial language.

#### **1. How can we recognise an imperialistic/colonial language situation?**

While many colonial situations are historically specific, the following features of an imperialistic or colonialist language situation seem to be readily identifiable:

- i) Overt or covert imposition of a previously external language in an increasing range of domains in public life and social interaction, usually by direct state action
- ii) The prevalence of asymmetrical bilingualism - colonisers rarely learn the language of the colonised, but the colonised are expected to learn the imperial language
- iii) A limitation of the functions of local languages, and often an ideological stigmatisation of the local language in favour of the more 'modern', 'advanced' or 'international' language, as described in the Declaration extract above.

However, as an increasing number of empires have now collapsed or faded, a fourth and novel criterion of a post-imperialistic language situation can be identified:

- iv) If and when an empire is overthrown, previous colonisers now redefine themselves as an embattled minority, to ensure that the imperial language remains the language of inter-ethnic communication, and asymmetrical bilingualism (and their own monolingualism) is insisted upon by reference to established rights of other minorities of quite different kinds.

## 2. How do we evaluate language laws and policies expressly designed to overturn a previously imperialistic language situation?

The case of the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and their renewed independence from the former Soviet Union is instructive in outlining typical language laws and policies that seek to overturn a previously imperialistic situation:

- the local national language become the (only) official state language and its use is mandated in all public institutions, government authorities etc
- there is an explicit rejection of an official two-language policy which would be a perpetuation of the previous regime and a further erosion of the local national languages.
- there is a requirement that all people in positions of contact with the public (eg public officials, professionals, trades people, salespeople) must be able to demonstrate an appropriate level of competence in the national language
- public displays of language (eg signage) must be predominantly in the national language
- the secondary and tertiary education system is progressively changed to one where the national language becomes the predominant language of instruction, while maintaining mother-tongue primary schools or partial curriculum for minorities
- at the level of daily interaction, individuals choose their language (the language laws do not attempt to regulate individual language use) and the former imperial language, Russian, is used frequently in daily life and media (Rannut 1994, Druviete 1997).

The introduction of these language laws and policy has seen impressive gains in the confidence with which local national languages are used and maintained, and learnt now by many previous non-speakers of these languages. However, these language laws have also been sharply criticised - Moscow began its criticism even before official independence, and maintained it since (Alksnis 1991, Ramishvili 1998). Criticism of discrimination has also come from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE] and the EU, even though the evidence of any discrimination is hotly contested. In the Baltic situation, citizenship has also been an issue: Lithuania, with the smallest Slav minority, granted citizenship to all residents; however Estonia and Latvia, with substantially greater Slav minorities introduced during the Soviet period, have given citizenship only to those already citizens in 1940, or their descendants, and made basic language proficiency a prerequisite for naturalisation of non-citizens. The language policies have also been criticised by some legal authors (de Varennes 1996) and by some public intellectuals in the West (Fukuyama 1992). While support and interest has come from some quarters eg Quebec (Maurais 1998), the Baltic States have clearly been embattled in their desire to change the previous imperialistic language situation.

## 3. Are such post-imperialist situations recognised in international instruments and language policies?

Many present declarations on language and minority rights seem to either be entirely unaware of, or deliberately evade the considerable issues raised by post-colonialism. In the case of the Baltic states, the problems begin with the very definition of the situation - a definition of the issue as one of local minorities and their rights, rather than what it essentially is - an international spat between the Baltic states and Russia in the light of Russia's insistence on still controlling affairs in its "near abroad". Moreover, this definition of the issue as one of local minorities and minority rights is itself a highly selective use of international law and conventions: the Geneva convention on military occupation clearly see it as illegal to bring in civilian populations into occupied countries, and there was long-standing recognition from virtually all western countries that the Soviet Union had illegally occupied the Baltic states in 1940. However, since regained independence, a clear desire to not risk conflict with Russia has led to an urging of the Baltic states to literally forget the past, and rapidly conform to ideals (real or supposed) of international treatment of minorities (OSCE 1993-2001, Burgess 1999). The threat of non-admission to the EU or NATO is used as a force majeure to gain compliance (Taylor 2002).

Thus, there is a refusal to recognise the situation as a post-colonialist situation, but to liken it to other situations of historic language minorities. This has the consequence, unintended or not, of liberal instruments of minority concerns being used to argue for radically non-liberal ends, in this case the

continuation of colonialist language relations.

In some cases, this has been an espousal that there should be two official languages in these countries (as Moscow argues, or de Varennes). The EU, NATO and OSCE have raised a steadily growing (and changing) list of demands over the 1990s including that there should be no prescription of language proficiency in the private economic sphere, a lessening or elimination of language requisites for citizenship, or (most recently) that candidates for public office should not have to demonstrate language proficiency.

A critique of this approach can be found elsewhere (Burgess 1999), but we will take just one of these demands, the call to have no language legislation covering the private economic sphere. It can be argued that this represents a failure to understand the specific nature of much private economic activity in post-Soviet countries, where the Soviet state apparatus in many forms transferred itself into the private economic sphere to maintain hegemony when political force would no longer work. Disallowing language legislation in the private economic sphere thus favours continued linguistic and economic imperialism.

This attack on language laws also very deliberately ignores the sociological evidence of actual language use and language attitudes of the supposedly oppressed or disadvantaged minorities. Research has shown that the Russian-speaking minority is actually a very diverse group: while a small, clearly pro-imperium grouping can be recognised (especially old militarist or Soviet period apparatchiki), the Russian-speaking group as a whole is very divided: in general it supports the legitimacy of the national language and its learning, and many see it as a reasonable criterion for gaining citizenship (Maley & Rose 1994, Laitin 1998). Many among the Russian speakers (especially women) speak or are learning the national languages and encourage their children to learn. Apart from the old militarists, the group least likely to learn these languages, and most denigrating of them, are higher status younger Russian males. There are also pensioners who feel unable to learn at their age. The vocal opponents of Baltic language policies do not represent the majority of the Russian speakers (Druvieta 1995, Ozolins 1999).

The steadily rising impatience of European institutions with Estonian and Latvian language policies, overtly to resolve ethnic antagonism and potential conflict, has unintended consequences when sociologically little such antagonism exists except for a small pro-imperialist section of the population. One aspect of the continued European demand to dilute language legislation seems to be a heightened confidence in this imperial party in demanding the continued privileging of Russian. Looking at the European and Russian criticisms most broadly, the historic imperialist presumption that small languages and cultures are of no worth, is now added to by legalistic presumptions that smaller languages cannot defend their status or particularity if they can be argued to impinge on any speakers at all of the previous imperial language.

Finally, we can enunciate some principles that would bring language policy more into line with fundamental objectives of decolonisation:

- survival and explicit strengthening of threatened smaller languages must be the priority where they have had prolonged contact with imperialist/colonial languages. The wine must not be poured into the wide river.
- asymmetrical bilingualism is to be discouraged in formerly colonial situations; the normal expectation should be that the new national language becomes the language of public life and interethnic contact; in cases where there are several national languages, they must in their area have this status over the former imperialist language
- universal principles of linguistic rights and language policies must be formulated so as to ensure that in former colonialist cases there is not a perpetuation of the previous hierarchical language situation in either public life or the private economic sphere.

In this brief paper we cannot identify all the necessary contrasts and similarities with other previous colonialist situations around the world. However, as long as such continuing imperialistic language

situations are not fully recognised, international language laws and policies will remain incomplete.

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(Workshop 1: Language laws and their implementation)

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## ABSTRACT

While the draft Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights refers to the need to consider the effects of former colonialism upon smaller languages, there has been inadequate consideration of how language policy should proceed if it is truly to result in decolonisation. The case of the Baltic states since renewed independence shows a paradox of linguistic decolonisation: that any language laws intended to enhance the local national language are criticised - by the former imperial power Russia but also by some European institutions - as discriminatory. If the concern for decolonisation is not to remain a dead letter, a careful rethinking needs to take place of how languages that have suffered from colonisation, invasion and occupation can legislate for their proper status in newly independent countries without false accusations of discrimination.