

## THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN COLOMBIA AND BEYOND

By Jacob Lagnado

Este ensayo crítico nos invita a reflexionar sobre los aspectos políticos, económicos y culturales de la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés en Colombia. El mercado de la mundialización es uno de los aspectos para su difusión, siendo la enseñanza uno de esos medios de difusión. Según el autor, la manera como se enseña y aprende una lengua está determinada por las necesidades del capital.

Palabras claves: políticas de las lenguas, mercado de las lenguas, enseñanza de las lenguas.

Dans cet essai critique, l'auteur nous invite à réfléchir sur les aspects politiques, économiques et culturels de l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de l'anglais en Colombie. Le marché de la globalisation est l'un des critères dans le choix de l'enseignement d'une langue. Selon lui, ce qui détermine la langue enseignée et la manière comment elle est apprise sont les besoins du capital.

Mots-clés : politiques linguistiques, marché des langues, enseignement des langues.

The author presents a critical understanding of the dimensions of English teaching and learning in Colombia. The criteria for language teaching is market-based. His reflection leads him to consider their political, economical and cultural aspects; among them, the author states that the needs of capital determine both the language taught and the way it is taught.

Key words: politics of language, language market, language teaching.



A foreign language often seems to transport us to a fantasy world far removed from the world we are immersed in, so in a country such as Colombia with its multiple problems, it is hardly surprising if those working with or studying languages should then choose to circumnavigate rather than address the social implications of their profession. But the question remains: what relevance does language learning have to the debates concerning the kind of society we aim to live in?

In other professions the social issues are relatively clearcut: The engineer is faced with the politics of the oil industry and ecological controversies, the future health worker with the chronic state of the nation's health service, the lawyer with the constant struggle of might and right, and so on. The future professional in each of these areas may choose to take a position, or alternatively sidestep these issues, but at least the issues are visible to all.

Is the area of languages different? Is it somehow immune from the debates within the society in which it is taught? Not so, if we accept the philosophical premise that all knowledge is 'value-laden' as opposed to being neutral or objective. In that case, to take the ex-

ample of the language teacher, we are bound to accept that he or she in conveying knowledge also conveys certain values, or preconceptions, which are received by the students who measure that knowledge up against their own 'value-laden' knowledge which they bring into the classroom.

If knowledge implies values, then different sets of values in turn have a material basis in the society we live in, reflecting the different forces at play within it. The type of knowledge we choose (or are requested) to impart depends on how we relate to those social forces, as well as the balance of power between them. Both factors are interdependent. However, where majority intellectual opinion does not consider the political and economic system we live in a matter to be contested, but rather as some kind of natural fate to which we must resign and accommodate ourselves, there is little discussion of *why we learn what we learn*, in language faculties or elsewhere. In such an environment knowledge risks being presented in a valueless, pseudo-objective wrapping.

English is clearly the priority language being taught in Colombia as well as vast other regions of the world. On a personal level the reason for this is decep-

tively straightforward: the student usually learns English for *instrumental* reasons – those linked to a particular purpose – and/or *integrative* reasons in those based on a wish to immerse oneself in an English speaking society.<sup>1</sup> Whichever the case, the drive to learn derives largely from the economic and cultural relevance of the English language: English represents economic self-improvement (getting a job abroad or improving one's career prospects at home) and the gateway to a new culture whose character is defined through personal contact (eg. with family who have lived in the English speaking world) and the mass media. Now from an apparently straightforward question/answer we may notice that the immediate, personal drive to learn derives from a number of potentially debatable premises. To what extent does working in the English speaking world represent a better quality of life? And what picture of the English speaking world is presented by the mass media? Certainly one which is based almost exclusively on images of North American and to a lesser extent

British life, precluding huge African, Asian and Caribbean English speaking societies. These are questions that in themselves deserve discussion and research.

Furthermore, the personal choice made to learn English based on the above mentioned economic and cultural factors finds its echo in the worldwide contemporary economic and cultural processes involving the two dominant English speaking nation-states, which Umberto Eco has summarized thus:

"The predominant position currently enjoyed by English is a historical contingency arising from the mercantile and colonial expansion of the British Empire, which was followed by American economic and technological hegemony. Of course it may be maintained that English has succeeded because it is rich in monosyllables, capable of absorbing foreign words and flexible in forming neologisms, etc; yet had Hitler won World War II and had the USA been reduced to a confederation of banana republics, we would probably today use German as a

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universal vehicular language, and Japanese electronics firms would advertise their products in Hong Kong airport duty-free shops (Zollfreie Waren) in German."<sup>2</sup>

To further illustrate Eco's point, the evidence of increasing interest in learning Japanese parallels the increasing importance of Japanese capital in Latin America and the simultaneous vaunting of Southeast Asia as an alternative model of capitalist development to the North American one for some sectors of the national bourgeoisie. Japanese is thus tentatively entering to compete in the terrain traditionally dominated by English as the language of capital, and regardless of how far it will actually succeed, the area of languages is therefore an example of how

"La educacion, cada vez mas, se esta convirtiendo en una buena suministradora de buenos clientes para el capital, personas adiestras para ser desde sus inicios buenos y selectivos contribuyentes de la sociedad de consumo".<sup>3</sup>

We can contrast the interest on Japanese with the total disinterest in our centres of foreign language learning in Quechua: a live language spoken by

millions of people in two much closer countries: Ecuador and Peru. This suggests that the criteria for which languages are to be taught and learnt is the criteria of capital, with English in first place but Japanese and German making headway. Is this inevitable? A fashionable response might be 'yes'. Current rhetoric tells us that language learning is 'important' because it responds to the process of 'changing realities' and 'globalization'. These are both euphemisms, 'changing realities' meaning the attempted extension of the market into every institution, and 'globalization' meaning the fulfilment of capital's promise as a truly international social relation of exploitation. But the free market only needs certain languages: the languages used by financial markets and transnational corporations, those unelected entities which influence state education policy across the world today, and whose 'needs' inform many aspects of the recent *reforma curricular*, as indeed some students themselves have pointed out. To "produce delighted clients" and "respond to changing realities" were therefore two of the recommendations of a British Council expert who visited the University of Antioquia in 1996 to advise on the kind of reform required.<sup>4</sup> The criteria for language teaching is market-based, both in terms of content and style (students are

now 'clients'). In other words, the needs of capital determine both the language taught *and* the way it is taught.

However, in periods of heightened social struggle, the criteria can change dramatically, because people recognize that language as a vehicle for wider social projects that they may wish to either attack or defend. Language, as a prime source of group identity, is revealed to be another terrain where social struggle takes place, as the following brief examples show:

In Peru Quechua was granted equal status as a national language alongside Spanish, by the Velasco government of the 1970s, as a result of a struggle by the majority Quechua speaking population for greater cultural and economic rights which had begun in the mid 1960s. Quechua is now an essential feature of state university education in Peru.

In the same period, English was neglected by students in Colombia as well as other countries in protest at the Vietnam war. But today in San Andres it is Spanish rather than English which is the language of economic and cultural domi-

nation, and the survival of the island's own brand of Caribbean English is seen as vital in the fight to retain the native islanders' unique historical identity.

Hence English teaching in San Andres takes on an entirely different meaning than in mainland Colombia: it is 'value-laden' in a different way. And in India, the imposition of the Hindu language by the chauvinistic religious

right is being opposed by ethnic minorities who wish to preserve their own cultural expressions.<sup>5</sup>

As well as being opposed 'from without', language may also be subverted from within, helping avoid a racial or nationalistic (mis)interpretation of the above examples. We see this on a daily basis in working class communities from the *parlache* of Medellin to London *cockney* (originally invented to confuse the police, according to the legend). Literature also can play a part in this process, whether reproducing even orthographically regional working class speech in the style of the much acclaimed (and in traditionalist quarters much maligned) Glaswegian author James Kelman, or attacking the official language on a more literary level in the manner of

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Spain's Juan Goytisolo.<sup>6</sup> Thus it matters not so much whether English or German or Esperanto becomes the 'global language', but what wider project for mankind that language is put at the service of.

In a pristine ideal condition, separated from usage, language *is* neutral, but in reality language is never separable from the uses to which it is put by the different actors in a constantly changing world society. What I hope to have provoked with this exploratory article is interest into *how* language has historically been put to different uses, which can then inform us better *why* we learn what we learn and in *the way* we learn it in the present, and how such a critical analysis might enable us to change what we learn and how we learn it.

## NOTES

- 1 For further elaboration of these distinctions see H. DOUGLAS BROWN. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, pp.115-117.
- 2 ECO, Umberto. *The Search for the Perfect Language*. Blackwell, Oxford, 1995 quoted in GOODMAN AND GRADDOL, *Redesigning English: new texts, new identities*. Routledge: London, 1996, p.181.
- 3 LUENGO, Josefa Martina. *La Escuela de la Anarquía*. Ediciones Madre Tierra: Madrid, 1993, p.26.
- 4 Such language represents the most retrogressive change in education experienced in Britain over recent years: the attempt to commodify learning and gear it more strictly towards the needs of capital. The most recent example of this being the Private Finance Initiatives whereby private companies are being invited to co-fund local schools. These moves however continue to be hotly contested by teachers.
- 5 See for example Salman Rushdie's comments on minority language literature in India in *Imaginary Homelands*. Granta, London: 1991, pp.169-172.
- 6 Both authors express the political implications of their literary endeavours - for example the class perspective of Kelman, Goytisolo's war on 'the sacred Spain' - both in their novels and in their own essays. On the latter count see for example JUAN GOYTISOLO, *Disidencias*. Seix Barral: Barcelona, 1977 and JAMES KELMAN, *Some Recent Attacks Cultural and Political*, AK Press: Edinburgh 1992.

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## NOTAS SOBRE EL AUTOR

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