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Globalization and Multilingualism: the Case of the UK

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Abstract

Although linguistic diversity has always been a defining feature of the British Isles, it has assumed new proportions in recent years, a period during which the transnational flow of people has been accompanied by a corresponding flow of languages. This paper charts the changing nature of diversity and the adaptations to which it has given rise on the part of both the host community and speakers of minority languages.

Introduction: The Numbers Game

During the recent period of globalization, linguistic diversity in the UK has assumed new proportions. It is difficult to establish precise numbers of speakers of minority languages in the UK today. Population censuses are of little help since the only language data collected relate to Welsh in Wales, Gaelic in Scotland, and Irish in Northern Ireland (Baker and Eversley, 2000; Edwards 2004). Data on ethnicity offer some indications. The 2001 Census,¹ for instance, points to important differences in the distribution of minority ethnic communities. Thus, while two per cent of the population of England and Wales are Indian, this group constitutes 25.7 per cent of the population in the midlands city of Leicester. Similarly, Bangladeshis form 0.5 per cent of the population of England and Wales, but 33.4 per cent of the population of the London borough of Tower Hamlets. This information, however, is of limited value in trying to estimate the numbers of speakers of a language: ‘Indians’ speak many different languages; and ethnicity is not an automatic guarantee that the person in question speaks a language other than English.

Various school surveys also offer indications. Baker and Eversley (2000) report that more than 300 different home languages are spoken by some 850,000 school children in the Greater London area. Each of the top ten languages – Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati, Hindi/Urdu, Turkish, Arabic, English-based Creoles, Yoruba and Cantonese – was spoken at the time the survey was undertaken by at least 40,000 school children. Extrapolating from the school survey data, they estimated that there were at least eighteen communities with more than 50,000 people; of these, French, Arabic, Spanish, Greek, Portuguese and Russian all had 200,000 or more speakers.

Information is also available on the languages spoken by children outside the capital. The CILT (2005) survey of every local authority in England, Wales and Scotland reported that at least 300 languages were spoken by 702,000 children in England; the corresponding statistics for Wales were 98 languages spoken by 8,000 children, and 104 languages spoken by 11,000 children in Scotland.

¹ www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/commentaries/ethnicity.asp#ethnic

An important feature of the recent surveys is the changing nature of diversity, both in terms of the languages most commonly spoken – described by Vertovec (2006) as “superdiversity” – and the distribution of these languages. Whereas multilingualism was previously an urban phenomenon, there is now a greater presence of minority language speakers in rural areas. A significant development, however, concerns the enlargement of the European Union from 15 to 25 member states in 2004. Of the previous EU countries, only the UK, Ireland and Sweden granted full work rights to nationals of the new accession countries. In the two years following enlargement some 427,000 East Europeans registered for work; with the addition of the self-employed, it is estimated that the total was in excess of 600,000 (Anseau, 2006). Poles make up by far the largest proportion of these new arrivals (62 per cent), followed by Lithuanians (12 per cent) and Slovaks (10 per cent).

Culture, Communication and Adaptation

In considering the linguistic adaptations of minority communities in the UK, it is important to remember that the communities in question are by no means homogeneous. In many of the longer established communities, such as the Kwéyòl speaking community in London (Nwemely, 1996), the shift to English is almost complete. In contrast, new arrivals are proficient in their home languages. While the inevitable consequence of settlement in the UK is a shift from the language of the home to English, the speed and extent of this shift will depend on various factors, including individual acts of identity (cf. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985) and the ethnolinguistic vitality of the community in question (Giles, Bourhis and Taylor 1977). There are many clues as to the ethnolinguistic vitality of new minority languages. The discussion which follows will consider four main areas – religion, the economy, the media and the arts – before examining the impact of the changed public policy environment on the language behaviours and attitudes of both the host and minority communities.

Religion

Religious institutions such as the church, mosque, *gurudwara* or temple not only provide for spiritual needs, but fulfil an important cultural and welfare role in the life of many communities. Salverda (2006) reports that some 25 languages other than English are used regularly for religious purposes in London. The impact of the new Polish diaspora on the Catholic Church has attracted a great deal of attention. Leslie (2007), for instance, draws attention to the unprecedented demand in South-East England for mass and confession in Polish. In the Islamic community, Qu’ranic Arabic is used alongside many other languages. According to Reader (2002: 67, cited in Salverda 2006: 2), it is possible to buy versions of the Qu’ran at the International Islamic Dawah Centre near the London Central Mosque in a wide range of languages, including Albanian, Chinese, English, French, Korean, Polish and Spanish. Minority languages, of course, are vehicles not only for worship but also for social interaction before and after worship and for the various social and cultural activities organized by religious groups.

The Economy

Ethnic economies are an important feature of life in the UK. For instance, in Bangladeshi areas of East London, Mirpuri Panjabi areas of Bradford or Gujarati areas of Leicester, it is possible to find restaurants, travel agents and food and clothing shops run by and for the communities in question. Ethnic economies of this kind not only provide employment for large numbers of workers; they also create an environment where it is more natural to use the minority language to communicate with co-workers and customers from the same community. The Global London website with its strapline: “The world in one city: where to find almost everything ethnic and cultural in the multilingual capital” suggests that other languages can also be an attraction for outsiders. Tourists, for instance, are interested not only in the scenery but in new cultural experiences: other languages help create a sense of place and mark the destination out as different.

Mainstream businesses have only recently awoken to the fact that minority communities make up a significant market segment. Initiatives that target minorities rely heavily on the knowledge and experience of new minority language speakers. So, too, do the public and private agencies which provide services for minority communities.

New minority languages also play a role in global markets. Knowledge of other languages is now widely recognized as offering businesses a competitive edge. While English may be the language of wider communication for the educated elite, the great bulk of the world's population understand only the local language. Efforts to address the urgent need for language skills in business are currently spearheaded by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (CILT), the National Centre for Languages, and the (Regional) Language Networks² which aims to promote a greater national capability in languages for business and employment. Speakers of new minority languages are a key element in the national reservoir of language skills.

Ethnic Media

The minority press is another indicator of ethnolinguistic vitality. 40 or so newspapers and periodicals serve many different language communities in the UK (Edwards, 2004: 171–2). London is particularly well served with daily newspapers in Chinese (*Sing Tao*), Polish (*Dziennik Polski*) and Italian (*London Sera* and *La voce sera*); it is also a major centre for Arabic publishing.

The minority press usually starts as a small-scale operation, with the same person often serving as journalist, editor, distributor, and printer. Many publications are family-owned and invest whatever they earn back into their enterprise. Although most titles remain in the hands of independent owners, there are exceptions. For instance, *Parikiaki*, the London Greek Cypriot newspaper, is affiliated with *Haravgi*, a newspaper in Cyprus.

In the newer communities, the minority press usually focuses on national and international news, and news and sports from the home country. In older more established communities,

² www.cilt.org.uk/employment

the assumption is that most readers will be able to access news in English and so the focus is on the home country. Newspapers try, of course, to address as wide an audience as possible and use languages accordingly. Thus *Parikiaki* uses Greek for news that is likely to be of main interest to the migrant generation and English for information likely to appeal to younger people (Georgiou, 2003).

Minority radio and TV, like the minority press, play a key role in the transmission of new minority languages and cultures. They are also an important medium of entertainment, with the potential to reach a much wider audience, including those who are illiterate in the minority language, in English or in both. Growing numbers of radio stations now carry programmes for minority communities; most cater for speakers of South Asian languages. Sometimes minority media are small, short-lived projects produced by families, groups and associations. Well over 100 aspiring community radio groups make use of a 28-day licence once a year, often during religious celebrations, such as Ramadan and Vaisaiki (Georgiou, 2003).

Digitalization has, of course, created many new possibilities for minority media: according to one estimate, every third Cypriot household in one area of north London has a satellite dish in order to watch the evening news from Greece (Georgiou, 2003). In other cases, local networks specifically target overseas communities. Networks such as Zee TV provide entertainment in English, Urdu and Hindi for viewers from the Indian sub-continent. Satellite TV would appear to serve different purposes for different viewers. Robins (2001) describes the case of a Turkish woman in her thirties who had come to London ten years previously, and who watches Turkish TV for the news, but British programmes for entertainment. Another woman who watched mainly Turkish television read British newspapers and so was well aware of what was going on around her. Far from retreating into ethnic ghettos, members of minority communities are well placed to move between and evaluate different cultural spaces.

Last but not least, the Internet has revolutionized communication in minority communities (Crystal, 2001: 219–21). There has been a proliferation of websites dedicated to minority languages. The advantages of web publishing are clear to see: it offers a cheap alternative to traditional media, which is not constrained by legislation and allows for two-way interaction.

The Arts

Linguistic minorities have had an enormous impact on the cultural life in the UK. The presence of a wide range of art forms reinforces the distinctive identities of minority communities; it also gives English-speakers access to a much wider range of experiences and choices.

The rhythms, melodies and lyrics passed from one generation to the next in family events or social gatherings are strongly linked with the identity of the group. Indian weddings, for instance, are associated with an extensive repertoire of songs, serving a wide range of functions (Edwards and Katbamna, 1989). Religious music such as Qawwali singing in the Pakistani community is another important focus for cultural and linguistic identity (Edwards, 2004: 199). UK cities are a reservoir of talent. The *London Diaspora Capital* project, run by the arts charity

Cultural Co-operation, is designed to exploit this rich potential, raising the profile of London-based artists from different national backgrounds.³ The main tool is a web-based interactive database with audio-visual profiles of performers whose life journeys have converged in the capital. Global London⁴ also provides extensive listings of minority cultural organizations.

The different traditions which meet in the UK often transcend linguistic and cultural barriers to create hybrid performances with a very broad appeal. The Yellow Earth Theatre⁵ is a case in point. Its bilingual production of Shakespeare's *King Lear* addresses the miscommunication that arises from migration. Lear, in his Shanghai penthouse, hands over control of his global business empire to his daughters and asks them to justify their inheritance. The older sisters flatter their father in elegant Chinese but English-educated Cordelia, no longer fluent in her father's tongue, says nothing and the loss of face sends Lear into a fury.

Musical fusion is another manifestation of languages and cultures in contact. Take the case of Bhangra, the roots of which lie in the traditional Panjabi music performed on festive occasions. Indians in the UK have used the same percussion instruments that provide the rhythms for traditional Bhangra as the foundation for strong melds with musical influences from the west. Since the early 1990s, it has gained popularity with mainstream as well as British Indian audiences, with bands like Apache Indian making an appearance in the UK charts.

Adaptation on the Part of the Host Community

As the above examples show, the maintenance of minority languages and cultures has obvious advantages for the host community. Adaptations on the part of the majority group are reflected in the changing public policy environment, particularly in the area of education. Historically, official attitudes towards minority languages in the UK veered from hostile to lukewarm. Speakers of Celtic languages were subjected to corporal punishment for using their languages in the classroom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Edwards 2004). By the 1970s, however, there was evidence of greater acceptance. The Bullock Report on *Languages for All: A Language for Life* (1975: 286), for instance, acknowledged that:

No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart.

The emphasis nonetheless remained on the teaching of English to the exclusion of minority languages, a position reinforced by the recommendation of the 1985 Swann Report, *Education for All*, that responsibility for community (or heritage) languages should lie with minority communities rather than mainstream schools.

³ www.culturalco-operation.org

⁴ www.global-london.com

⁵ www.yellowearth.org

There has been intermittent pressure on government to diversify language provision in response to the challenge of global markets. Official policy on this question has been rather contradictory. The Department of Education and Science (1988) accepted the validity of arguments for diversification of the modern foreign language curriculum and acknowledged the need for speakers of Japanese, Chinese and other Asian languages. However, it was not considered cost effective to provide teaching in these languages for pupils of compulsory school age. Several recent developments have signalled a significant policy departure from this position.

The Nuffield Languages Inquiry (1998-2000) was an important turning point. Acting on the recommendations contained in the final report (Nuffield Foundation, 2000), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) launched a strategy for language teaching in England in 2002 in which new minority languages are seen as an important element in cultural cohesion:

In the knowledge society of the 21st century, language competence and intercultural understanding are ... an essential part of being a citizen. Language skills are also vital in improving understanding between people here and in the wider world, and in supporting global citizenship by breaking down barriers of ignorance and suspicion between nations. Learning other languages gives us insight into the people, culture and traditions of other countries, and helps us to understand our own language and culture. Drawing on the skills and expertise of those who speak community languages will promote citizenship and complement the Government's broader work on the promotion of social cohesion (p.13).

The UK position is thus in line with changing attitudes towards new minority languages in Europe. The Council of Europe *Guide to Language Education Policies in Europe* (Beacco and Byram, 2003) and the European Commission's (2003) *Action Plan for Languages 2004-6* both promote diversification of language learning, including new minority languages.

The rapid increase in provision for Chinese teaching in mainstream schools is just one indicator of the change in attitudes. Between ten and thirteen per cent of English secondary schools provide some Mandarin teaching, although much of this provision takes place outside normal curriculum time. Mandarin is also offered in a growing number of primary schools. From 2008 schools will be free to offer any major European or world language as their statutory modern foreign language for pupils aged 11-14. According to CILT (2006), at least 35 different community languages are taught during the school day or on school premises after school hours.

Official recognition of the Celtic languages has also played a part in raising the status of minority languages. The 1993 Welsh Language Act and the 2007 Gaelic Language Act now accord equal status to these languages in public life. Three language boards have responsibility for the promotion of the Celtic languages: Bwrdd yr Iaith Gymraeg in Wales (1990); Foras na Gaeilge, as the island of Ireland body (1998) and Bòrd na Gàidhlig in Scotland in 2006. It would be inconsistent to treat bilingualism as an asset in relation to these 'older mother tongues' without according the same status to children who are bilingual in English and other minority languages.

Conclusion

As we have seen, precise numbers of speakers of new minority languages are difficult to establish because questions related to language in the population census are limited to Welsh in Wales, Gaelic in Scotland and Irish in Northern Ireland. Current estimates are based on recent school surveys; coverage is incomplete. It is nonetheless possible to detect two main trends. The first relates to the very large number of languages in use: at least 300 languages are spoken in England, and close to 100 languages in Wales and Scotland. The second concerns distribution. Whereas multilingualism was previously an urban phenomenon, there is now a greater presence of new minority language speakers in rural areas.

The dramatically changed population of the UK inevitable raises questions in relation to adaptations of both host and minority communities. Language maintenance and shift are complex issues. While new arrivals are proficient in their community languages, in many of the longer established communities the shift to English is almost complete. The ethnolinguistic vitality of the community in question, however, exerts an important influence on the speed and extent of this shift. There are many indicators. Religious institutions such as the church, mosque, *gurudwara* or temple not only provide for spiritual needs, but play an important role in the cultural life of many communities, offering a range of opportunities for using new minority languages. Various aspects of economic activity offer similar possibilities. The ability to speak new minority languages plays a role in global markets; ethnic economies are an important feature of life in the UK; and minority communities make up a significant market segment in themselves. The minority press serves many different minority communities, as do minority radio and TV. Minority communities also have an enormous impact on the cultural life of the UK.

The refusal of the state in the mid-1980s to make provision for the teaching of minority languages has meant that responsibility for the organization of classes has fallen on minority communities. In the last decade, however, there has been a significant softening of attitudes. The traditional focus on the teaching of modern foreign languages such as French, German, Spanish and Italian languages has been extended to include non-European languages, with particular attention to world languages like Chinese and Arabic.

Many people, of course, do not subscribe wholeheartedly to the new discourse of inclusion which surrounds discussion of new minority languages, including some of the members of the government responsible for framing this policy. David Blunkett, for instance, illustrates his limited understanding of the role of language in a speech delivered in 2002 as Home Secretary where he makes reference to the ‘schizophrenia [associated with bilingualism] which bedevils generational relationships’. Similarly, during the 2010 general election campaign, Robinson (2010) commented in the *Daily Mail* on the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party in the following terms:

Despite his Anglo-Saxon name, Nick Clegg is by blood the least British leader of a British political party, the son of a Dutch mother and a half-Russian merchant banker father.

There is, then, no room for complacency.

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