

<https://www.doi.org/10.31918/twejer.21lich.7>

e-ISSN (2617-0752)

p-ISSN (2617-0744)



The Politics of Language: Linguistic Despotism from Colonialism to Nationalism

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Abstract:

Languages have always been under the impact of political powers - both national authorities and foreign forces. They have been used as a tool of power to control and rule. In doing so, some languages have been given hegemony over others. The hegemonic ones have always been under *de* and *re*-construction. That is aiming at creating a parallel form of language along with the hegemonic ideology of the power itself. Besides, liberal thoughts and libertarian movements could not enough help the plural linguistic community of mankind. They, however, followed almost the same method as the others in using language as a tool to control and rule. While colonialism negatively affected languages, de-colonialism and nationalism also did almost the same. That is because the modern understanding of the very idea of the nation-state is mostly about unifying a country within an only framework of identity. It is obvious that to unify is to merge, if not to eliminate the other. Thus, it can result that the hegemony of a language, within a political border of a country, and even beyond that, is always threatening the survival of other languages. The present paper analyzes the politics of language and the performances of political powers, in both colonial and national forms. In doing so, it seeks to address how a language can be victimized by both colonial and national powers. The paper uses the qualitative method to collect and analyze data - within the framework of political science. It calls both Edward Said's Orientalism and Noam Chomsky's thoughts as a theoretical framework that helps understand, analyze and summarize the argument.

Keywords: Language; Politics; Nationalism; Liberalism; Colonialism.

Introduction and Methodology

1.1. The background and the significance of the study

At least for linguistics, language has been recognized as a cognitive system that leads the way one thinks, believes and then behaves. Thus, to control one's language is to control their performance. This is what makes language an important issue in politics. While linguistics and the speakers of a language are less in need of politicians to do them a favour, the politicians are indeed in need of linguistics to do so. The power, to justify its politics of language and its language policy, depends on arguments and justifications that are built by linguistics within academic institutions, such as universities. This is where power and knowledge can cooperate. Defining one's tongue as a formal, central, or standard language and the others' language as local accents is an example of the cooperation among power and linguistics aiming at political benefits. This can easily be seen concerning the Persian language in Iran, as an example. This, of course, would not happen if there would not any notions and ideas of better-ness by a group of people who think their language and race are better than others. Then, this leads them to enforce not just a language but also a culture, a vision, a way of thinking and an ideology. And, again, all of these would be done with the support of ideological arguments, such as the idea of building a state for stateless people. Accordingly, where a marginalized language can be assumed as a threat to the state's national identity, security and interest, the ideas of linguistic despotism and linguistic justice would come to the mind of power and people.

During the past decade, as De Schutter (2020) argues, several studies have been developed within political theory in which they have been conducted in a normative way. These are called 'theories

of linguistic justice' in which they are about to address the question of 'what is a just language policy?'. He adds that "within the related literature, language policy is typically taken to refer to the political management of the presence of different language groups within a political community: the paradigmatic cases in these analyses of linguistic diversity are political communities with two or more distinct language groups" (p. 146). De Schutter believes that there is a forgotten dimension of language policy which is "the political management of linguistic diversity occurring within the same language group" (2020, p. 146). This would be much more felt when the issue of the standard version of a language appears; when the power grants a higher status to a version of language among other versions. Injustice is not always built by colonial powers within others' communities, but it could also be built by national powers when they are about to build a specific form of the modern state, the nation-state.

The unjust that a state does to a language is not always concern other languages. It could also be wrong that a state does to a language itself, even if it is aiming at granting that language the highest status. This usually happens when a state wants to change the natural flavour of a language into one that could reflect the state's ideology. This would usually be done aiming to educate people about a specific ideology via promoting a specific version of a language filled with ideological terms. This, sometimes, is an attempt to prove that people naturally agree with a specific ideology and that ideology is rooted in people's tradition, culture and language. This would be argued as the language shows that a specific ideology is a natural character of the nation itself. This is an unjust policy toward a language, as the attempts are to change the natural character of the language and replace it with an artificial one, made by the state.

Languages, like almost every other issue, have been under the impact of the process of modernity. Politically, they have mostly been treated unjustly – as their speakers have been assumed as *the others* by both foreign forces and national authorities. Weinstock (2014) argues that “many languages find themselves under threat because their speakers have been subjected to injustices. Colonialism and nation-building are the two most prominent political forces that have led to considerable pressure being placed on speakers of languages deemed to be ‘backward’ and ‘uncivilized’ to abandon the languages of their forebears to take up those of their colonial or metropolitan masters” (p. 178). Industrially and then technologically, ‘local’ languages, which are the undeniable majority, have been targeted by the speakers of what is called civilized and standard languages. The second ones have usually owned the tools of newly developed technology, including media. They use these tools to achieve their political goals. This usually goes through enforcing one’s will and vision over others, and also uniting people via making almost everything a single thing, namely a single language. The way that the Kurdish language has been dealt with in modern Turkey can be a good example of this case.

The fact is that the politics of language and the language policy of power, or the way that power deals with multilingualism in a plural society, is yet understudied. As Ricento (2020) argues, “within the language policy and planning literature, coherent and explicit theories of politics and power are rarely evident. Terms such as ‘dominant language’ and ‘minority language’ can mean different things in different contexts” (p. 202). He adds that “within the literature of political theory, a great deal of attention is paid to liberalism, justice, and rights, but when these frameworks and their corresponding criteria are applied to matters of languages and language policies, normative approaches tend to ignore or

mischaracterize the relations between language, identity, community, and the evolution of particular societies viewed from a long-term historical perspective" (p. 202). Thus, here is where both political and linguistic methods of studies require being redesigned – in a way that interdisciplinary studies may help.

1.2. Methodology

The study's topic is related to more than a field of science. This would complicate the study if it would not put within a specific framework. The problem here is that separating the fields of knowledge from each other and looking at each one from an abstract angle would not help address such a complex issue. Thus, linguistic despotism in the politics of language is what links language and power. Accordingly, both fields of linguistics and politics should be taken into the applied area of the study. This is where the study can contribute to knowledge. Nevertheless, the main focus here would stay on the viewpoint of political science. This will pave the way to design and draw the study's question, which is: how a language can be victimized by both colonial and national powers? It is to illustrate the potential unjust that power, whether national or colonial, can do with the linguistical issues - from artificializing to marginalizing and then to linguicide a language.

The method that the study follows, to address the question, is qualitative. This would be used to collect and analyze data. The main framework, nevertheless, is political science. That is, mainly, because the viewpoint has been shaped based on using the lens of politics to look at the issues like despotism and injustice in linguistics. Besides, the study uses the concepts of 'the politics of language' and 'the language policy' precisely. Here, the politics of language is understood as the state's strategic vision on language

and linguistic issues - aiming at rising its ideology and interest. Besides, the language policy is understood as a state's practical plans on linguistic issues - aiming at developing its politics of language. Not just concepts, but the study also benefits from theories. In doing so, it calls both Edward Said and Noam Chomsky. Their theories would be used as a theoretical framework for the study which can help illustrate the politics of language of both colonial and national states.

Edward Said's well-known work, *Orientalism*, has lots to say on the politics of language and the language policy of colonial powers. The fundamental of the thought, in this regard, is that language can be considered the main ingredient of culture. Thus, the shortcut to influencing and then occupying a culture is to start with the language. This is where the colonial powers have always been aware of it, and that is the way they have been attempting to ignore one and enforce another language. The fact is that the main issue, for colonialism, is the matter of hegemony which cultural hegemony is the main part – especially after the “end” of physical colonialism and the start of “ongoing” cultural imperialism (See: Said, 1978). The colonial system is using language, culture and knowledge as tools of power. The aim, therefore, is to “dominate and subvert indigenous populations through a process of cultural alienation” (Sweeting & Vickers, 2007, p. 2-3). The colonial power, nonetheless, as Sweeting and Vickers argue, gives some sort of autonomy to the colonized nations; however, that is to guarantee their hegemony. In arguing this, Said believes that “hegemony can only work if the controlled enjoy a degree of social, economic and cultural autonomy” (Ibid, p. 4).

In terms of a state's domestic policy, towards its people/s, Noam Chomsky has his own political and linguistic views. He believes that language has been used by the state as a tool to conceal the political truth; it is then to be used to control and rule. Thus, language is a matter of politics in which the state uses it as an instrument to guarantee the sustainability of its power (Olson; Faigley & Chomsky, 1991). That is why, as Chomsky argues, the state is artificializing language to the one that could serve its ideology. He defends his argument by claiming that language is taught because it is artificial. Chomsky believes that artificializing and using language by the state to maintain the structures of authority and domination (Ibid). De Beaugrande (1991) clarifies Chomsky's position on the state's use of language. He argues that the language has been used for political and social purposes, such as to facilitate authority. It is, moreover, for "championing the languages of the rich and powerful over indigenous and minority languages whose speakers are going to be worse off than if they had learned English" (p. 429). Consequently, language can be considered an element in building up new social classes. Language has a role in increasing the gap between the main political stream and the minorities.

2. The National Politics of Language: liberal and totalitarian perspectives

The state's politics of language, and its language policy, are not always what its people are happy with. It is, indeed, a matter of politics more than culture and law, or a natural human right. Thus, while for an ordinary speaker of a language, speaking means nothing more than a psycho-societal issue, for the state it does mean more. Thus, the states are having different politics regarding the issue of language. Generally, what forms the state's politics of

language is what shapes its ideology and interest. Here, liberal and totalitarian perspectives on language issues are taken as examples.

2.1. The Liberal Perspective

The liberal perspective of language is the one that is based on liberal values, including democracy and pluralism. It is also based on the idea of respecting one's identity. This is the one which seems that all can be happy with and within it. That is because human rights, including linguistic-related ones, should be recognized, respected and guaranteed. However, the western world, which represents the liberal perspective, has come from a history of linguistic violence. While what happened to the indigenous people of the US, Canada and Australia remained unanswered, their demise can say something. Nevertheless, the western world is becoming a place where linguistic rights are more but relatively respected. There are good examples of successful language policies of contemporary states such as Canada and Switzerland in dealing with their multilingual society, and Sweden and other Scandinavian states in dealing with the language of the refugees and foreigners (See: Burnaby, 1997; Kuzeleweska, 2016; and Sundberg, 2013).

The liberal perspective of language is grounded in democratic values. However, democracy and particularly its participatory form, as Orelus and Chomsky (2014) argue, is "worth fighting for so that people can live in a society where their languages, cultures, and 'funds of knowledge' are respected and incorporated into the school curriculum; where workers would not be brutally exploited; and, most importantly, where ordinary citizens would be part of the political decision-making processes affecting their lives, rather than being passive spectators of these processes" (p. 61). They add that "unless these necessary conditions are fully met, the concept of

democracy would merely remain an illusion created by those in power, who have historically used empty rhetoric to gain the consent of, and give false hope to, the masses to maintain the status quo” (Ibid, p. 61).

The fact, however, is that in the US, which can be considered the main defender of democracy and the most democratic country in the world, the issue does not seem to be as democratic as it claims. There were “marginalized groups such as Latino/as have been prohibited from speaking Spanish in schools. The colonial legacy continues to affect marginalized groups linguistically and culturally, especially with the rise of the English-only movement” (Ibid, p. 57). Orelus and Chomsky (2014) add that this is not only related to political authority but intellectuals too. The conservative intellectuals who attack non-English languages and cultures reject multiculturalism and advocate for a common culture. Then, they pose a must-asked question, which is: “who exactly has been benefiting from the Western form of democracy?” (2014, p. 57). This is a rhetorical question that the authors try to attract attention to the argument that the Western version of democracy mostly serves the culture and language of the powerful ones. Democracy has become a sphere where powerful ones have more chances to impose their language over others. At its best, it has become the tyranny of the majority over the minority.

2.2. The Totalitarian Perspective

The totalitarian perspective of language is the one that uses language, as everything else, to serve the ideology of the state. This perspective is based on non-liberal, but totalitarian, ideologies. It is where the power is about to make everything be in the service of what it wants to be. This could be a leftist ideology or a nationalist one – the one that believes in the bitterness of a language, a race,

faith or anything else over the others. The power's justifications in making a language from languages would be that this policy is to serve people; it is what makes people united, developed, prosperous and proud; it is what makes 'the enemy', as the state usually do have, unhappy. However, the fact is that they believe that, uniting peoples, cultures and languages in one makes control and rule easy. The idea also comes from the thought of a powerful entity is one that is untied in almost everything. Here, pluralism not just would not be supported, but not even accepted; that is because it seemed to be a method to divide the nation.

Linguistic totalitarianism has various forms, from left to right. Communism is its leftist version; Fascism and Nazism can be considered as its far-right version. There are also liberal-looking versions of this totalitarian perspective of the language. They are those who claim to be liberal, but the fact is that they do almost the same as the others do in terms of the politics of language and their language policy. Modern Turkey, as a secular and democratic republic, is a good example of the liberal-looking version of authorities that follows almost the same methods that totalitarianism does - in terms of dealing with the language of *others*. The contemporary United States is another example – as mentioned before.

The fact is that language is woven into political issues with high significance and great philosophical meanings. In the modern era, languages could draw and shape the political borders of nations. Languages could make one proud of himself or ashamed as they have been treated based on their language – using stereotypes such as un/civilized individuals (See: Patten, 2003).

The way that the totalitarian perspective of the language can be conducted usually goes through two different, but complementary,

stages. The first one is to enforce a language that can represent the power's identity and interests, as the formal and standard language of the country. The second stage is to artificialize the enforced language to be the one that could represent and serve the state's ideology and interest. While enforcing a language is against the existence of other languages, artificializing one is against the natural essence of the enforced language itself. That is because, for a totalitarian state, language, like almost everything else, has no value, if it could not serve the state's ideology and interest. Thus, the state will change the language's nature to one that can serve the state's ideology. This is, of course, a covert linguicide (See: Ventsel, 2009; Fuentes, 2013; Stroińska, 2002). A totalitarian state change/manipulates a language and cleanse others with no hesitation. That is, mainly, because of the crucial role that language can play in propaganda and education, and also because of the narrow-angle of view of the ideology that the state follows.

3. The International Politics of Language: colonialism and globalization

The politics of language is not only limited to the politics of only a single state within its borders. It is, furthermore, extended to a sort of corporation among several states which speak the same language. Besides, it could be related to the way that the world has been driven into - regarding a hegemonic language of nation/s over others. The English language can represent the politics of powerful states. English has become an "international" language of politics, trade, technology and more. This has an impact on the performance of non-English nations and their speakers at local and global levels of politics. The fact is that English globally and some other languages regionally could become the hegemonic ones because those states are powerful. On this, Orelus & Chomsky (2014) argue that "English is the most dominant language because the United

States is the richest and by far the most powerful country in the world. So sure, English is the dominant language, not Swahili” (p. 59). Related to the English language, of course, the power that the British Empire had and used in trade and colonialism had a major role in prevailing the English language in the international sphere. That is all besides the specific nature of the language itself as has its characteristics which made it easy to spread. Thus, it is not all about the physical and political aspects of the state, but the language itself too.

3.1. Colonialism and Imperialism:

The role that language can play in the process of controlling others is undeniable. That is the one that colonialism has never ignored. It, even, can be argued that spreading the language of colonial powers, as a sphere of their culture and system of beliefs, was/is a motivation to invade countries. Thus, for colonialism, language is: first, a motivation for colonial powers to think about spreading it all around the world, or at least around their colonies; second, a prison in which the colonial power put others in it to ease controlling and ruling them. It is, as Condé (1995) argues, “a language is not simply a mean expression, a translating medium, but it is a prison, especially when it is imposed by the colonial power” (p. 21-22).

On the significance that colonial powers gave to spreading their language in their colonies, Orelus & Chomsky (2014) recall Walter Rodney’s book of 1972, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. They state that: “schools of kindergarten and primary level for Africans in Portuguese colonies were nothing but agencies for the spread of the Portuguese language”. Adding that “most schools were controlled by the Catholic Church, as a reflection of the unity of church and state in fascist Portugal”. Besides, “in the little-

known Spanish colony of Guinea (Rio Muni), the small amount of education given to Africans was based on eliminating the use of local languages by the pupils and on instilling in their hearts the holy fear of God” (p. 57). This could be considered a model example for other colonial powers too and how they dealt with the issues of language.

Generally, the politics of language in imperialism, and neo-colonialism have been under more focus. Here, a greater role is given to non-physical and cultural issues, mainly language - as language can embrace almost all cultural aspects of a nation, a civilization. That is because the objectives of the colonial powers are no longer achievable only via the use of hard power. This gave more role to language as the physical conquests have mostly been replaced by cultural invasions. This linguistic imperialism and neo-imperialism, which is an English-based one, as Phillips (2008) states, is having an impact at both micro and macro levels of the life of individuals, groups and nations. Gilman (1989) clarifies the new methods of new imperialism, stating that “the ‘new interdisciplinarianism’ turns out to be a new imperialism in disguise, and - as was to a large extent also true of the old imperialism - its weapon for colonizing, reducing, and ultimately burying the natives of the visual realm is language” (p. 5). Consequently, neo-imperialist powers are continuing to focus on their old goals; however, their mechanism has been changed, and the role that language can play has dramatically risen.

3.2. Trade and Technology

At the global level, there is an unjust environment for the use of languages, all the world. This could be a result of the unjust distribution of wealth, development and power in the world. This environment is just like what has been created at other levels of

national and local. What shaped this, besides the imperialist thoughts and colonialist acts, are the revolutions of industry and then technology which helped accelerate the process of enforcing and spreading one's language over others. The globalized world, however, bolded the linguistic despotism in which it can be deeper with more effects, and broader with more areas to cover. Almost everything in the daily life of people has been affected by the revolution of information and communication technologies. This includes languages from all over the world (See: Dejica, et al, 2016). Hence, there is a huge impact of technology on language and culture, there are also attempts to protect some traditional values. Surprisingly, this, preserving the tradition, has been conducted through the use of technology itself.

The impact that information and communication technologies have on languages is different. It is affecting language in a dual-affecting way. Once is weakening some languages because technology and globalization are serving the languages of the great powers of economy and trade. And once, it is helping the neglected languages to find a platform to speak loudly and write globally - in the languages which have been deprived of appearing in the state's media and publications or the curriculums of a country. Accordingly, while a language can be weakened at a global level by the English language, it can be strengthened at its local-national level. In other words, information and communication technologies give instruments to the hegemonic languages to eliminate even more languages; at the same time, it creates opportunities for the endangered languages to survive. It is empowering the local languages that have no platform for performance. While mass media and traditional media such as TV, Newspapers, Magazines, and also school curriculums are in the hands of the state, new and

social media platforms are becoming arenas where silenced linguistic communities can scream.

The contemporary era is characterized by the role of technology in almost every aspect of the life of individuals and nations. Nowadays, the impact that it has on science, culture, art, trade and more is undeniable. The English-speaking countries, nonetheless, are spreading their culture through their language by using companies and corporations that have a global effect. They even use that version of the English language which embraces a specific culture and system of beliefs - which are usually the western cultural and political values with a flavour of Christianity. This can be found in mediums of education - especially teaching English language, art, trade, and the internet (See: Shah & Pathan, 2016; Heiman, 1994).

4. Conclusion

While the politics of language and language policy are rarely having a role in determining elections or changing governments, language is something political (Miles, 2000). Accordingly, what a state does with linguistic issues is about its politics. Generally, because of the way that a state draws its politics of language, an unjust situation among languages has been created. This could be called linguistic despotism which requires linguistic justice to be solved. The injustice in linguistics is about granting hegemony to a language and marginalizing others. This, as Patten and Kymlicka (2003) argue, is most obvious where there is the rising use of the English language among non-native English speakers. They add that “English has rapidly established itself as the international language of business, telecommunication, diplomacy, education, pop culture, science, scholarship, and travel. Since so many day-to-day activities take place in a context of global interconnectedness-

from listening to the radio, to reading a college textbook, to holding a meeting in a corporate office- English impinges on the lives of people in non-English-speaking countries regularly, even if a great deal of everyday life still takes place in local languages” (p. 43).

The growing use of the English language, besides its political aspect, has also become a matter of economy. English language has become and is treated as a commodity too (See: McGill, 2013). An example is that “teaching English as a second language is now a vast global industry worth billions of dollars a year and employing tens of thousands of people”. Nowadays, “as many as one billion people are learning English and perhaps half the world’s population will have some proficiency in it by 2050” (Patten and Kymlicka, 2003, p. 43). The fact is that it is not only about the growing use of English, but it is, at the same time, about the declining use of other languages. Consequently, this will accelerate the process of demising more languages and putting more on the list of endangered ones. Notwithstanding, this growth is not always happening due to economy, trade and technology, but the fact is that this has been enforced to happen and supported to continue.

Language, in the contemporary era, has more role than ever in identifying peoples’ national and political identity (See: Edwards, 2009). It is a matter of identity that should be respected. It is one of the basic human rights and liberties of being who they are and speaking what they want. However, linguistic rights have always been treated as political ones; as ones that can have an impact on a state’s national security, identity and interest. This, consequently, has led those who aim to protect a language to found a political or a semi-political organization; they are about to use the same tool as the one that has been used to marginalize their language. This has come from the idea of modern states which are based on the nation-state model – where language is the base of identifying a nation

that should be transferred into a nation-state. Thus, modern politics is about interactions among nation-states, as well as among languages.

The modern political experiences are mostly about linguistic despotism and unjust linguistic policies – at both national and international levels. This has gone through various periods, and also various political ideologies. There was an undeniable linguistic despotism in the practices of ideologies of far-right nationalists such as Nazism (in Germany) and Fascism (in Italy), communism (in the Soviet Union), and then later liberal nationalists (in Turkey), and totalitarianism (in China), nationalist-theocracy (in Iran), militarism (in Myanmar) and much more. The fact is that any language can be victimized by both national and global powers, and by both totalitarian and liberal ideologies. On the one hand, globalization and international trade and technology, with the help of English-speaking countries are about to marginalize other languages. On the other hand, national powers are also about enforcing a language over others and are also about changing the real nature of that enforced language to the one that could serve the state's ideology and interest.

Linguistic despotism, because of the sensibility of the matter of language and its tie with the issue of identity, is linked to almost all political regimes. For totalitarians, it seems like hard despotism. However, for the liberal ones, it is a soft one. It is a hidden one that most of the time does not appear to all, but the vulnerable linguistic communities, such as Welsh in the United Kingdom – a longstanding democracy, and Hawrami in Iraq – a newly established semi-democracy. It can be argued that political despotism leads to linguistic despotism; and linguistic despotism leads to sociopolitical despotism, too. Stop this linguistic despotism and injustice requires to recall of Bourdieu (1977) who states “just

as, at the level of relations between groups, a language is worth what who speak it are worth, so too, at the level of interactions between individuals, speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it” (p. 652). This can be considered as valuing language and its speakers; it can be followed through using perspectives of humanitarian justice, but not “political” ones.

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