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Transcending the Group: Languages of Contact and Lingua Francas

5.1 Languages of contact and lingua francas

Part I of the book focused on how there are pressures within communities to move towards linguistic homogeneity. The argument was that speaking in the same way is an act of identity as well as an act of communication. The language policymakers and planners of the nation building era understood this and, recognising that language is a very powerful social glue in the constitution of groups, systematically and rigorously encouraged the creation of a single community of communication within the polity. Because they sought to change behaviour top-down, the very activity of language policymaking has come to be seen as inherently repressive (Brumfit 2002). But it should not be forgotten that they mostly succeeded because there was consensus from below. Nationalist ideology was accepted by large majorities within populations for a significant period, particularly in Europe.

In Part II, the book turns to the question of contact among speakers from different speech communities and discovers how communication is achieved across language borders. Humans solve their communication problems in one of two ways: either by developing an interlanguage which both sides employ, or by one group, or a section of one group, learning the other’s language. The likelihood of one solution rather than the other stems from the reasons for the communication and power relationships. A wish to trade and benefit economically from contact, a need to bow to political pressure, to accommodate to a conqueror, an aspiration to identify with the ideology or religion of another group and have access to its sacred works, a desire to access new ideas, new art, new technologies in order to adopt them, are immensely different reasons for contact and will each have a different linguistic outcome and provoke different behaviour and practices.

One of the crucial differences in language learning derives from whether the language has a written form or not. Where the target language only
exists in the spoken form, it can only be acquired through direct contact with its speakers, and this is how language learning happened throughout most of human history, as need arose through new face-to-face contact with outsiders. To become fluent in the language of an oral society meant to live among the group that spoke that language. Once the language was written, however, it could be detached from its speakers and learnt as a system outside of their physical presence, although considerable phonological and semantic distortion might occur.

The motivations for learning a language are also affected by literacy and the circulation of information in written form. Once knowledge can be disseminated through the written word, then a second language may be learnt to gain access to sacred texts and ideological works, to new technologies or to language-borne culture. Transfer can be depersonalised and access to knowledge does not depend on the agreement of the authors once they have committed the knowledge to public record. In the past, formal learning of a written language was usually restricted to a small, literate, elite class charged with assuring translation and interpretation between groups for transfer of cultural or technical knowledge.

Now we are entering a new phase in human association. With the advent of audio-visual media, face-to-face contact is reproduced in virtual form for millions of people. With the vast growth in the knowledge now stored and disseminated in electronic formats, the number of people concerned with the retrieval of written information in other languages has increased exponentially. With the rise of global regulation, systems and regimes, the world operates as a unit in an increasing number of domains, and communication among the parts needs to be achieved. Learning the languages of others is no longer the affair of a small cosmopolitan elite or a bilingual clerical class, traders or travellers. A far larger proportion of the world now wants or needs to communicate across language borders.

This chapter briefly reviews the history of language groups in contact and discuss some of the lingua francas and pidgins that have arisen in the past when two groups came into contact. The linguistic solutions for trading relations do not appear to be so different from those following conquest and occupation when the conquered have to accommodate to serving the conquerors. This gives some insight into the similar pressures that economic superiority, greater political power, cultural prestige, or technological supremacy exert in the choice of language. The second part of the chapter focuses on the acquisition of a codified and standardised language of a group seen to be prestigious. Here learners are not always under direct pressure to acquire the language, but see the access to information that it will bring and the prestige association that it permits as advantageous both to them and to their society.

Traditionally, there has been much less conscious language planning to achieve intergroup comprehension than for intragroup. Until the recent past, societal acquisition of foreign languages was not necessarily the affair