

THE LANGUAGE DILEMMA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

May 2001

LANGUAGE

Language is defined as a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings communicate, as members of a social group and participants in its culture.¹ Human society is modeled on the development of language, on the ability to communicate and to record.

Language as a means of communication on this planet is peculiar to humankind.

BABEL

With approximately 6,000 languages in use in a mere 200-odd countries of the world, multilingualism is a global reality.

Some languages are spoken by millions of people; some are in their last generation before extinction. Some countries try to protect threatened languages within their borders; some ignore them. Some countries seek to promote unity through a common language: the ways, means and reasons for this can differ sharply.

THE LANGUAGE DILEMMA

The US-English Foundation is the largest organization in the United States working specifically on language related issues and the integration of immigrants. "The Language Dilemma" is a Foundation project set up to deal specifically with the issue of language and its legal position worldwide.

Over the twelve months to project completion in December 2000 the research team in Slovakia, where the whole was compiled, studied 58 European, Asian and African countries. The 850-page results of that research can be found on the US-English Foundation web page (www.us-english.org).

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, www.britannica.com, 1999-2000

The aim of the project was to gather information on and the legal framework for minority language rights in a range of countries, primarily in Europe. At base it set out to answer a very simple question:

Does the country have a language law or not and, in either case, what resultant problems must it deal with?

THE RESULTS

As well as making public the base data on the language situation worldwide the research results are important for their evidence of the effects of differing types of language legislation and their implementation. Vital for countries planning new language legislation, this is also crucial information for understanding minority tensions world-wide.

CONCLUSIONS

The countries studied were grouped into five types having broadly similar frameworks of language legislation. The groups are introduced on the following pages. A wider Summary is also available.

All conclusions arise from results that are substantially varied by the individual circumstances of the country. They nevertheless tend to suggest successful language legislation – that resulting in an integrated society assimilating, acknowledging and protecting minority cultures – will not fall into groups that exhibit the common characteristic of a mandatory official language and the repression or prohibition of minority languages (Groups E and D).

Successful language legislation can be shown to exist in all five groups, but is more evident in the first three:

- A legislative framework of one official national language with minority language rights restricted to regions (Group C) illustrates a stronger possibility of ethnic division along the lines of language demarcation
- A legislative framework of one official national language with minority language rights unrestricted by area but not actively promoted (Group B) shows at first sight a discouraging trend toward ethnic tension, but this is almost entirely caused by quite separate political ambitions.
- A legislative framework of one or many official national language(s), with minority language rights actively promoted and protected (Group A countries) evidences little ethnic tension, but, with some exceptions, is for ethnically uniform countries. Even they have to work hard to maintain an artificial environment of many co-official languages.

We conclude that, given a broadly stable and respectable system of government, the adoption of a single State language is a legislative

framework simple to manage and well able to incorporate the inclusion of support and protection for minority languages. These are characteristic features of Group B. The further advantage this framework offers is that the assimilation of the minority into the society of the majority is possible whilst at the same time the integration of his culture to the benefit of the majority can be preserved.

GROUP COMPARISON

The countries studied were grouped into five types having broadly similar frameworks of language legislation. The Full Summary compares most of the material gathered. This Executive Summary limits itself to the outlines and to the conclusions able to be drawn.

The Group A countries are characterized by single or multiple official languages of equal status according to the number of distinct language groups indigenous to the country. Minority languages are supported, encouraged in use, and protected for the value of their integration into the host society.

No problems are reported between ethnic groups in any of these countries due to language or cultural suppression or restriction.

The Group B countries are characterized by either an homogenous population and a single State language or an essentially bilingual population and two State languages. Minority languages are not excluded from society but are not encouraged. Previous membership of the former Soviet Socialist Republic is a feature of this group.

A number of countries are clearly hampered in their ability to support minority languages by a lack of resources. Some National Minority tensions arise because of a lack of support. A number are struggling to reverse a repressive language policy instigated earlier. Generally this reversal is forced by a late understanding of the disastrous effect of alienating a substantial minority of the population.

Some countries are hampered by political ambitions from any smooth realization of their constitutional tolerance of a minority language. All these suffer from ethnic tensions destructive to their economies.

The Group C countries are characterized slightly more broadly, but in general have one official language and either an homogenous population, a single significant ethnic minority or a range of equally influential ethnic groups. Language rights are specific to regions of minority or differing ethnic concentration and minority language rights invariably exclude co-official status.

Developed homogenous countries with official languages in a controlled legislative environment evidence no ethnic tension. Some less developed countries apply a strictly controlled legislative environment totally out of tune with their ethnic minorities. The tensions arising can be extreme.

Of those countries with three or more official languages two suffer from violent ethnic tension, for quite different but purely political reasons.

The language legislation structures of the remainder each differ substantially and have not given rise to ethnic tension.

Group D countries espouse a single, mandatory, official language and repress minority languages in various ways.

Extreme repression invariably results in extreme ethnic tension. Repression as simple lack of support or interest does give rise to ethnic disadvantage and to tension. Because this result often occurs in developed countries, amongst different ethnic groups and in compliance with the wishes of the electorate, it cannot be clearly linked only to the act of minority language repression.

The Group E countries are characterized by the adoption of a single, mandatory, official language and by the prohibition of minority languages to various degrees.

This is a framework adopted by countries requiring national assimilation by any means. With one exception it results in a collapsing economy, endemic corruption, civil unrest and international disrespect.

Nearly all European countries researched exhibit one common failing: to protect, encourage or support their minority *Roma* language or culture. The Roma minority exists in nearly all of them, and in all of them resists integration, assimilation or participation.

RESEARCH NOTES

To answer the original question demanded a very complex piece of research. The study had to cover not only the existence of language legislation but take account also of ethnic composition, historical background, problems with the languages' use and a host of individual details for each country.

Even at its simplest the question posed problems for the research team. In many cases a government was unable or unwilling to provide the text or even a reference to the law. In many cases the need for more detailed information and situation review still demands further in-country research.

In dealing with language the team has been forced to include some aspects of general culture. Language and cultural characteristics are too closely interdependent to bear complete separation.

Whatever may be the letter of the law there are instances where the citizens' reactions to essentially the same set of rules are wildly different as a result only of their subjective confidence in their government's integrity.

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