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STRATEGIES OF COMMUNICATION IN THE INFORMATION AGE: ON THE NATURE OF NATIONAL-ENGLISH BILINGUALISM

1. Introduction

We live in the information age. What does this widely-used expression mean? The term "information age" is odd. It suggests that, nowadays, our flow of information about the world is continuously growing, and our perspectives are constantly widening. In fact, we have lived in the information age for many centuries, ever since Marco Polo (1254–1324) told the Europeans about life in China (Shen 1996, 169 ff), ever since Columbus discovered America, ever since Europeans set out on their voyages for exploring Arctic waters (Puteshestviya 1995, Lainema/Nurminen 2001), ever since Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) embarked upon his expeditions in the Americas and in Siberia, ever since the sciences experienced their breakthrough in the 19th century.

What distinguishes our age from previous ones is a certain quality, and this is the electronic dimension of information transfer. We have long been living in the information age, but now we are constructing network society. This term, popularized especially by Manuel Castells (1996-98), was intended to remind us that while the pace of accumulating information about the world is accelerating, with the amount of information thus virtually exploding, the capacity of modern data banks to store this information seems unlimited.

2. The role of language and literacy in the process of constructing knowledge

Among the top priorities of network society is the construction of knowledge. Accumulating data is one thing, constructing knowledge is quite another. The computer facilitates the processing and storage of individual data, but – for the purpose of constructing knowledge – the human mind is needed to evaluate the electronic information, to select, categorize and rank essential data. Knowledge is always a matter of how information is "anthropologically" exploited, of how the human mind constructs order, and of how a relational network emerges from masses of unsystematically amassed data.

Constructing reliable knowledge is becoming an ever more demanding task. The flow of information which we are supposed to digest actually overwhelms us. The age of a digital processing of an unlimited amount of data does not necessarily liberate us. On the contrary, we live in the age of a "digital delirium" (A. and M. Kroker 1997). However, there is, seemingly, no alternative to this ongoing process.

Our world is divided in many ways. The pace of constructing network society is swift in some parts, in others, it stagnates or has not started at all. Network society offers benefits to those who have immediate access to its services. But in several countries, there are many people who do not share the benefits. The highly developed countries of the northern hemisphere – and some in the south such as Australia and New Zealand – are controlling the flow of information about the world and are monopolizing their technological know-how. The developing countries have become dependent on the know-how and knowledge available in the north.

The unbalanced development of network society enhances a surge of uncontrolled capitalism. A new hierarchy of social classes is emerging. There are the relatively few who monopolize economic data banks, accumulate insiders' knowledge and control the flow of capital on the international markets. And there are the masses that – to varying degrees and at paces determined by region, sex, age and ethnic affiliation – become impoverished. A prototype of network society that fits this scenario can be found in modern Russia whose socioeconomic structures have been labeled "predatory capitalism" (Hedlund 1999).

A fruitful discourse about the fundamental dangers of the deteriorating modern societal development has long been neglected. Only recently has the socioeconomic imbalance in the process of globalization been openly acknowledged, directly addressed, and broadly documented on an international scale in the United Nations' "Human Development Report 1999."

The world is also linguistically divided. Whether English as a global language unites or separates us is a matter of opinion. From the standpoint of those who speak English as their mother tongue, have been educated in the English-speaking world, and have access to digital literacy, English functions as a strongly uniting factor promoting global intercommunication. Opposed to this attitude is the opinion held by many other people who do not live in an English-speaking country. According to their view, English, with its global reach, is exerting more and more pressure on local languages so that these, seemingly, face the permanent danger of being overly influenced or even replaced by English in vital functions.

The role of English in the world today is comparable to that of the cell phone as a vehicle of mass communication. The Finnish electronics company NOKIA

has created the slogan "NOKIA ... connecting people" as the slogan for its most popular products, cell phones. This could be understood as a metaphor of well-being in the information age and, referring to English, of its role as the promoter "par excellence" of global intercommunication.

Also, once again metaphorically, one may highlight the negative effects of an increasing use of cell phones. Among the Finns, an extended popular version of the slogan can be heard: "NOKIA ... connecting people ... and disconnecting families." People nowadays are always in a hurry and, for family members, this means that they meet in the flesh ever more infrequently. As a substitute for face-to-face contacts, family members communicate with one another from different places on the phone. Here, we see the disturbing effect of the cell phone on social relations and, in the metaphorical comparison with English, its assimilatory effect on contact languages, challenging non-English mother tongue speakers, as it is, to dislocate themselves from their home culture.

The fact that English is so vital for modern communication is no coincidence. Rather, it is the consistent result of a trend that has been going on for centuries. Political history has, in a peculiar way, favored English as the language that was always present at the right place at the right time (Crystal 1997). No matter whether we may think of English as a factor promoting globalization, or as one constituting a potential threat to cultural originality and linguistic diversity in the world, there are certain realities that we have to live with.

One of the essentials of network society is the presence of English in many functions and in many domains. Acknowledging the role of English in our modern world does not mean that we submit to its overwhelming influence. It means that we accept facts that cannot be changed and that we profess a sense of cultural realism, comparable with what is called "Realpolitik" in international relations.

A vast amount of our information about the world is electronically stored. In its elementary status of digital storing, the data in the data banks cannot be directly used by human beings. To make data operational in processes of decision-making and knowledge-construction, we have to rely on the oldest information technology of mankind, our language. It is well known that more than 90 per cent of the information about the world is available in English. Most people think that this means: Over 90 per cent is reserved for English with the remaining ten per cent somehow distributed among other languages. However, this is a misconception. When reference is made to the share of English-based information, this points at the accumulation of data in this particular language.

There is much information about the world that is not available in English. Information in other languages may differ in content, world-view or other quality from the information in English. Even in many cases of seeming data equivalence in English and some other language, the non-English information

may well contain connotations which the English equivalent lacks. For example, English terms such as 'democracy,' 'human rights' or 'terrorism' have linguistic equivalents in many languages, but there is a great diversity of how the contents of these expressions are associated with sociopolitical affairs in different parts of the world.

We have been educated in a world of literacy and we are accustomed to the idea that the accumulation of information for the purpose of successfully interacting in our cultural environment depends on the tradition of the written code (cf. Assmann 1999 for such a world-view). The written code is an essential tool for transferring digital data into sign sequences which can be processed by the human brain. The use of writing is nowadays distributed in two domains, in primary literacy (the production of texts on traditional materials and in traditional techniques) and in secondary literacy, which is equivalent to digital literacy (Gilster 1997).

And yet, the availability of information about the world is not limited to the means of primary or secondary literacy. There is another world which functions successfully without literacy, and this world is represented by traditional cultures in many parts of the world. Essential knowledge about the environmental conditions and of man's place in nature is stored in the minds of local people who are illiterate and who know little (if any) English. An example of cultural settings in a world without literacy which has been recently investigated is the traditional society of the Etoro in Papua-New Guinea (Kelly 1993).

We, in the world of literacy, tend to marginalize those people who are non-participants in the construction of network society. But we are well advised not to underestimate the value of orally memorized knowledge and not to neglect its sources. Perhaps one day, we may be in need of their knowledge in order to balance our problematic relationship with our natural surroundings which we have been so busy to pollute.

3. National-English bilingualism (NEB) – A functional pattern of communication and its infrastructure

In our world the impact of English is steadily growing, in the mass media, in marketing, in the domain of science as much as on the Internet. Network society has produced a new pattern of communication, and this is what I call national-English bilingualism (Haarmann 2001, 303 ff). In the following, I would like to outline some parameters of this modern dimension of communication.

3.1. What is the national component in NEB?

Regarding the infrastructure of NEB, this configuration of language components highlights a crucial contact situation where a given national (= non-English) language serves communicative purposes alongside English in the same domain and in similar functions, including digital literacy. "National" is a generic term which refers to a given non-English language. Currently, there are more than 550 languages of the world with an Internet presence, and the number is rapidly increasing. The national component can be (1) a language of wider communication (e.g. Russian, German, French), (2) a language with a local range but of regular use (e.g. Estonian, Icelandic, Catalan), (3) a lesser used language (e.g. Welsh, Tatar, Vepsian).

In Europe, we find a high density of local languages which participate in NEB. The smaller the national language and the lesser used, the greater the probability that a third language participates, which extends the elementary pattern of bilingualism to one of local multilingualism. Examples of such an extension are Komi-Russian-English multilingualism (in the Komi republic), Catalan-Spanish-English multilingualism (in Catalonia), Saami-Norwegian-English multilingualism in northern Norway.

3.2. What is the nature of NEB as a communicational pattern?

As for the terminological fabric of the concept NEB, there is some resemblance to a communicative pattern that was advocated by Soviet language planners, and this is "national-Russian bilingualism" (natsional'no-russkoe dvuyazychie); (cf. Desheriev 1976 for an ideological outline, Haarmann 2000, 796 f for a critical evaluation of its effects). And yet, national-Russian bilingualism differed, according to its nature, significantly from NEB.

National-Russian bilingualism was a pattern of personal bilingualism, with the national component (i.e. Estonian, Buryat, Udmurt) as the mother tongue and Russian as the second language. The obvious intention of Soviet language planners was to activate the second language component in a way as to ultimately make it the dominant means of communication among the non-Russian population and in contacts between Russians and non-Russians. Within such a framework, national-Russian bilingualism was a political instrument for eventually promoting the cultural and linguistic fusion of non-Russians with the Russians.

NEB in network society is different from the historical communicational pattern in Russia because it is a pattern of functional rather than personal bilingualism. This pattern of communication is not adopted under ideological

pressure, although, admittedly, there is some socioeconomic pressure associated with the dominance of English as a global language.

NEB does not imply the use of English in daily communication or at home with family members. Whether the consequences of an intensified bilingual communication in specific functions may enhance choices of personal bilingualism or not is yet to be seen.

3.3. What is the nature of English as a second language component in NEB?

The English component in NEB may remain passive, and it does not necessarily have to become active. This means that the reception of information in English (via reading and/or understanding) may suffice for participating in global intercommunication. On the other hand, any successful exchange of information in many fields of science depends on the ability to use English actively.

Given the functional implications of NEB, English as its component is represented by formal varieties, varieties which are rightly understood as "bloodless international English." This English is characterized by different sets of terminology. There is the vocabulary of Internet jargon, language use in the mass media, the various terminologies in the domains of science (natural sciences, information technology, etc.).

NEB English is an asset for work in various professional fields, not a means of everyday life. Thus, there is hardly any danger that this English may eventually supersede the national component of bilingualism or even cause language shift. Where, outside English-speaking countries, lesser-used languages are under pressure, this is due to the impact of a local language of the state (e.g. Mordvin in relation to Russian, Kassubian in relation to Polish, Hungarian in relation to Slovak), rather than to the influence of international English.

Seemingly, many people for whom English is not their mother tongue are afraid that, under the dominant influence of English, linguistic diversity in the world might be drastically reduced and some speak of "the world's languages in crisis" (Krauss 1992). Most of those statements are highly generalizing and exaggerated, and there is the danger of stirring up irrational sentiments. In fact, recent surveys of endangered languages show that, on a global scale, the threat of language death is much less dramatic than has hitherto been believed (Haarmann 2001).

Although, in the biggest graveyards of languages in the world (i.e. the USA and Australia), English is the crucial factor of destruction, this language is not, in terms of global statistics, directly responsible for the majority of settings where languages are endangered. There are a number of other languages which cause the death of minority languages such as Russian among the small speech

communities in Siberia, Portuguese in the Amazon region of Brazil, Spanish in the heartland of Colombia and Hausa in the north of Nigeria.

When assessing the role of English as a component of NEB, one has to bear in mind that we have to deal with a selection of formal varieties. There is much more to English than what we find in NEB. Recall that, in the historical process of spreading throughout the world, English also proliferated in terms of its internal variation. Speaking about English means speaking about the Englishes of the world. Linguistic variation reaches far beyond the well-known distinction between British and American English.

There are many local and social varieties of English, Hindish in India, the Australian outback English, ebonics in the USA, dozens of pidgins and creole languages that have emerged from the original source of European English. English deserves an entry in the Guinness Book of records as the one language which has produced the greatest number of historical derivations. So, the global role of English is relative and focuses on certain specialized functions.

4. Network society and NEB in Finland: elements of a case study

I would like to draw the reader's attention to Finland as an example of how NEB is functioning in Finnish society. Manuel Castells has recently highlighted Finland's leading role in the global process of constructing network society (Castells 2000). Finland's role is seen as that of a model in keeping up high standards of competitiveness in the field of information technology. The overall positive effects of socioeconomic development is that Finnish society has pre-served social stability throughout the process of modernization. In Finland, the majority of the population has access to the opportunities which network society offers (Castells/Himanen 2001).

Although a perfect harmonization of all the social groups and their vital interests will hardly be possible in Finland, unlike the USA, we do not observe the drifting away of a class of super-rich people who leave all others behind them. Even if Finland has not been immune to greater income disparities, this phenomenon does not have as immediate an affect on living standards as it does in American society. Castells mentions the USA as a negative example of how living standards are decreasing among members of the former middle class which is in the process of disintegration.

What are the consequences of the impact of English on language use in Finland, particularly in the domain of science? How does English affect the structures of a small language such as Finnish? In Finland, several languages of science have been in use since the country's independence in 1918: Finnish, Swedish, English, German and, occasionally, French, Italian and Russian. The

latter, nowadays, plays a role only for publications of Russian authors who have no chance of having their works published in Russia.

Contrary to a wide-spread misconception among western Europeans, Russian has never played any significant role in foreign language teaching in Finnish schools, where German, and later English, have dominated. For this reason, Russian is not an active medium for Finnish scientists either. In this respect, the Finnish situation differs significantly from that of neighboring Estonia, where Russian spread as a second language during the Soviet period.

English is the language of science with the greatest impact. English is not only used by Finnish scientists for communicating with the outside world, but it is also the language of teaching university courses to foreigners who come to study in Finland. Most professional varieties of Finnish have been heavily influenced by English. In addition to the transfer of thousands of borrowings and the creation of calques, we find English elements in Finnish word formation and English syntactic patterns in Finnish phrase structures. But this strong influence of English is true only for the specialized varieties.

Against the background of English presence in the fields of science and in the mass media, one may ask the question "What is the future of Finnish as a national language?" It is noteworthy that the strong influence of English in the scientific varieties of Finnish with their "Finglish" jargon contrasts visibly with colloquial and literary Finnish which are comparatively less affected by English. In this situation of massive language contact in certain functional domains, I cannot discern much of a threat to Finnish. Change is an everyday experience, for Finnish as for Russian or German. If people are self-confident and flexible, there will be no loss of cultural identity.

In their assessment of Finnish-English contacts, Haarmann and Holman (2001, 257) have demonstrated "that even if developments will have far-reaching consequences they are quite consistent with our knowledge about earlier periods of profound change instigated by intercultural contact. It is significant this time that Finland is an active rather than a merely passive participant, and that this would not have been possible without the knowledge and use of English."

5. How can we benefit from NEB?

There can be no doubt that NEB is needed for keeping us in the currents of global information exchange. English as the second language component poses a challenge rather than a threat to our cultural and linguistic identity. Globalization through the medium of English is not a process of an irreversible eradication of local identities, but rather one in which local cultures are challenged to mobilize their inner forces and to activate various patterns of adaptation.

In the era of an emerging network society, all cultures and languages that are involved experience change of some sort, locally differing in quality and magnitude. In this process of change, the influence exerted by English is a major variable. How the influence of global English affects local speech communities and whether modernization is always successful depends on many factors of language ecology. Most of all, it depends on the flexibility of local cultures to adapt to the requirements of modern communication.

Regarding the maintenance of local languages, this is always a function of people's consciousness and strength of mind. If we continental Europeans are determined to benefit from network society, we will safeguard the advantage of being bicultural and bilingual. Biculturalism and bilingualism provide us with the opportunity to look at the world from different angles, and this is a kind of mental capital that monolingual English-speaking people painfully lack.

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