

Journal of Universal Language 24-2. September 2023, 71-89
DOI 10.22425/jul.2023.24.2.71
eISSN 2508-5344

Linguistic Diversity and Justice: The Role of Artificial Languages in Multilingual Societies

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Abstract

In a globalized society, effective communication across linguistic boundaries is essential. This paper explores the advantages and challenges of multilingualism, emphasizing its role in shaping societies and relationships. It contrasts the use of dominant natural languages with the development of artificial languages like Esperanto and Unish, highlighting their potential in promoting linguistic equality and neutrality. While acknowledging their limitations, these artificial languages offer promising avenues for more equitable and

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Received 4 July, 2023; Revised 13 August, 2023; Accepted 13 September, 2023

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inclusive multilingual communication, contributing to the ongoing discourse on linguistic diversity and justice.

Keywords: multilingualism, linguistic diversity, linguistic equality, linguistic justice, lingua franca, natural language, artificial language

1. Introduction

Multilingualism is a pervasive global phenomenon, as evidenced by the existence of over 7,000 languages worldwide, a striking contrast to the mere 195 countries comprising the contemporary global landscape. This incongruity, where linguistic diversity far exceeds the number of sovereign nations, inherently fosters the development of multilingualism, characterized by the use of two or more languages. While the extent of this heterogeneity varies among nations, the presence of linguistically homogeneous countries is exceedingly rare. Noteworthy examples of nations where over 90 percent of the population speaks a single language are limited to a select few, including Bangladesh, Germany, Japan, and South Korea (Mishina 2020: 7). Additionally, it is worth noting that multilingual speakers outnumber monolingual speakers in the global population (Tucker 1999). In essence, it is virtually impossible for a state to be monolingual, as distinctions only arise from the level of linguistic diversity within populations. Furthermore, dynamic socio-political forces such as globalization and Europeanization are playing significant roles in accelerating the transformation of societies into multilingual or linguistically heterogeneous entities (Mishina 2020: 7, Csata & Marácz 2021: 1). This study endeavors to assess the merits and demerits associated with multilingualism while also exploring potential strategies to mitigate the accompanying disadvantages,

especially focusing on the role of artificial languages.

2. Benefits and Challenges of Multilingualism

2.1. Benefits of Multilingualism

Multilingualism can be broadly defined as the coexistence of two or more languages (Pilipenko 2019, cited in Park 2023), or more narrowly as the presence of multiple languages within a society (Moormann-Kimáková 2016: 29). In the context of this article, multilingualism is employed as an inclusive term that encompasses bilingualism (the proficient use of two languages), trilingualism (the proficient use of three languages), and instances where a speaker demonstrates proficiency in more than three languages.

When considering the abundance of languages in comparison to the number of countries, multilingualism can be regarded as a natural occurrence (Park 2023). Extensive research has examined the advantages of multilingualism at both the individual and societal level. At the individual level, proficiency in multiple languages is known to confer numerous benefits, surpassing those of proficiency in a single language, particularly in terms of cognitive development (Monnier et al. 2022), cognitive performance (Pot et al. 2018), cognitive flexibility, creativity (Kim & Runco 2022), critical multilingual language awareness (García 2017), and multilingual pragmatic awareness (Martinez-Buffa & Safont 2023). Additionally, multilingual individuals exhibit enhancements in memory, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills (Bialystok et al. 2012). Furthermore, being multilingual translates to more extensive opportunities for communication with a diverse range of individuals and confers advantages in trade and job

markets (Chiswick & Miller 2007).

Another significant strand of research in the realm of multilingualism centers on societal impacts, predominantly emanating from sociologists. These scholars establish a robust nexus between multilingualism and key dimensions of social inclusion and justice. Departing from the conventional nation-state paradigm, which often upholds the ‘one nation, one language’ ideology—an assertion emphasizing the importance of monolingualism or the adoption of a single, common language for the sake of social cohesion (Piller 2015)—these sociologists emphasize the pivotal role of linguistic diversity in shaping human behavior. They regard multilingualism as a catalyst for social justice, highlighting its stark contrast with the inherent inequalities entrenched in a monolingual mindset. Beyond mere academic inquiry, they have actively engaged in the study and advocacy of multilingualism, exerting tangible influence on the formulation of national language policies that recognize the diverse multilingual fabric of a country’s populace. Their impact extends notably into the realm of education, where they provide guidance for the development and implementation of bilingual programs and heritage language courses. Furthermore, certain scholars have made substantial contributions to language revitalization efforts by adopting a multilingual approach to the subject (Duchêne 2020: 92).

3. Strategies to Address Multilingualism Challenges

Marácz (2018) asserts that the process of globalization elevates the frequency of encounters with linguistic diversity and amplifies the significance of implementing multilingual and transnational communication strategies. He introduces a ‘toolkit’ (Jørgensen 2011)

comprising several pivotal strategies, including translation and interpreting (T&I), information and communication technology (ICT) applications like machine translation, lingua franca (LF), foreign language learning (FLL), and lingua receptiva (LaRa). Within this array of strategies, our focus will center on T&I and LF, both of which represent traditional and extensively utilized approaches.

3.1. Translation and Interpretation

Translation and interpretation represent the most conventional methods employed when individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds engage in communication. Nevertheless, their effectiveness in the context of a multilingual society remains a subject of scrutiny. As exemplified by the European Union (EU) institutions, which serve as a representative multilingual society, extensive deployment of interpreters and translators is necessary to uphold linguistic diversity and linguistic parity. The official website of the European Union offers an exhaustive delineation of the roles assumed by its corps of interpreters.

Conference interpreters are at the forefront of multilingualism, working to ensure that language is no barrier to participating in or following meetings. Interpreters understand what is being said in one language and render the speaker's message almost instantly in another, ensuring that the citizens of Europe can be represented in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg by their elected representatives and best experts. By enabling communication and facilitating dialogue, interpreters act as a bridge between cultures and are at the very heart of decision-making processes. The interpreting services of the European Union are the world's

largest employers of conference interpreters.¹

At EU institutions, translators predominantly work in their native languages to ensure precise and clear conveyance of the original message to target audiences. For example, materials intended for Danish readers are typically translated by native Danish speakers. In order to cater to the linguistic diversity represented by the 24 official languages, the EU employs approximately 2,000 staff members for translation services, incurring a translation cost of €355 million, which accounts for approximately 0.2% of the EU budget as of 2022.² Remarkably, the EU's recognition of these 24 official languages stands as a testament to its commitment to acknowledging linguistic diversity. Counterintuitively, the expenses associated with translation and interpretation are relatively modest (Gobbo 2005: 7). Nevertheless, practical challenges persist in ensuring that an adequate number of highly skilled interpreters are available when needed, compounded by the intricate nature of the translation process. These challenges are further amplified when translation and interpretation extend to the private sector. Consequently, while translation and interpretation serve as valuable tools for addressing the complexities that may arise in a multilingual society, they cannot function as standalone solutions and necessitate supplementary measures.

3.2. Lingua Franca

A prominent phenomenon intimately intertwined with globalization is the phenomenon of the globalization of languages (Steger 2003: 72).

¹ Source: <https://europa.eu/interpretation/>

² Source: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f857c858-a021-11ec-83e1-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-294149277>

The advent of globalization has engendered heightened interactions among individuals speaking diverse native languages, thereby intensifying the demand for a lingua franca to facilitate communication across linguistic barriers. Consequently, this demand has necessitated the emergence of a global lingua franca. Lingua franca is broadly defined as “a language which is habitually used by individuals whose mother tongues differ, with the purpose of facilitating communication among them” (UNESCO 1953: 46, as quoted in Samarin 1968: 661).

Throughout history, several languages have assumed roles as regional lingua francas, including Greek (Koine), Latin, French, Aramaic, Akkadian, Swahili, German, and Russian. Presently, there exists a growing demand for a universal common language capable of transcending regional boundaries and serving as a global medium of communication. English is widely acknowledged as the primary candidate for this role, and it is either firmly established or strongly positioned as the global lingua franca. Nevertheless, the adoption of English as the natural language for a lingua franca has been met with criticism due to its perceived bias towards native English speakers. Consequently, some proponents argue for an alternative approach: the adoption of an artificial language devoid of native speakers as the lingua franca. In the following two sections, we will critically examine the arguments both in favor of using English as the lingua franca and in favor of employing an artificial language for this purpose.

3.2.1. English as a Lingua Franca

There is an unequivocal acknowledgment that English currently holds the status of the most influential and widely spoken language across the globe, transcending geographical and regional boundaries. It serves as a primary medium of communication in virtually every sphere of human activity, encompassing economics, military affairs,

culture, trade, and academia. The ubiquity of English can be attributed to its historical dissemination through the colonial expansion of the British Empire and the subsequent ascendance of the English-speaking United States as a global superpower. Consequently, English has garnered recognition as an international language, boasting a considerably larger population of non-native speakers in comparison to native speakers (see Crystal 1997, McCrum 2010).

The increasing ubiquity of English is now met with more pronounced criticism. Fiedler (2010: 204) expounds on some of the critical perspectives regarding the widespread global adoption of English:

It has been argued ... that the dominance of a single language as a medium of international communication leads to communicative inequality. The spread of English encourages the development of a general monoculture and favours Anglo-American ideas and authors and leads to severe disadvantages for non-Anglophones as well as to a devaluation of other foreign languages.

Fiedler underscores that when natural languages extend beyond their native domains, it engenders uneven utilization among their speakers, subsequently culminating in communicative inequality (Fiedler 2010: 202). She introduces Ammon's (1994: 10–11) delineation of the advantages bestowed upon native speakers within this context of “unfair competition” between native and non-native speakers, as follows:

This advantage [...] is indeed enormous. It includes huge additional incomes through language teaching, translating, interpreting, and text correcting, and it also includes communicative superiority in important situations, faster access to decisive information, and

the like. In a competitive world, these advantages for the lingua-franca-providing language community are at the same time disadvantages for the other language communities. To illustrate this with just one example: An English official at the political bodies of the EU needs, as a rule, much less energy and time to read the numerous texts in English which are part of the agenda of the meetings than does his/her Italian or German colleague. S/he is less exhausted and finds extra time for other activities. In addition, s/he understands the texts more precisely and can express her/himself more articulately at the meetings.

Non-native speakers invest substantial resources, including financial resources, time, and effort, in the acquisition of English language skills. However, even with these investments, pronunciations and expressions that deviate from the established standards of British and American English are frequently deemed errors and subject to punitive measures. In essence, this linguistic inequality stratifies individuals into first and second-class citizens, predicated on whether they are native English speakers or not (Choo 1996: 7, Park 2023: 89).

In contrast to the perspective that categorizes pronunciations, accents, and expressions that do not conform to the standards of native speakers as errors and of lesser quality, proponents of English as a lingua franca (ELF) regard these variations as legitimate linguistic diversities rather than errors. Given the substantial numerical superiority of non-native speakers of English over traditional native speakers globally (Kachru 1985, 1991; Crystal 1997), Seidlhofer (2007: 309) contends that English used as a lingua franca among non-native speakers constitutes ‘Real English’. Fiedler (2010: 207–209) elucidates three strengths of ELF, as follows:

The first and probably major appeal of the *ELF* approach is the

new position of the language learner and user. Non-native speakers are no longer seen as failed native speakers ... who speak their own type of 'interlanguage'... A second appeal of the *ELF* is its orientation towards cultural neutrality ... Due to the close relationship between language and culture, the dominant use of English in important fields of social interaction leads to the adoption of Anglo-American ways of thinking, communicating and even living ... In contrast, the ELF model, as I understand it, aims at intercultural communication and pleads for the protection of different language cultures. ... A third advantage is that the model of ELF is meant to give other languages a chance.

In light of the current state of English usage, which predominantly favors native speakers of the language, the ELF model, with its numerous advantages in attracting non-native speakers, may appear enticing and idealistic but has encountered skepticism regarding its practical feasibility. While the ELF paradigm asserts that pronunciations and expressions differing from those of native speakers are not errors but rather manifestations of variation and diversity, critics raise concerns about its real-world acceptability. In practice, there exists a wide spectrum of English proficiency and fluency even among non-native speakers (James 2005: 140). Moreover, in non-native/non-native lingua franca communication, individuals with higher levels of fluency tend to hold an advantage (Knapp 2002: 238). Furthermore, there is a discernible preference for adhering to native-speaker norms, particularly those associated with British and American English (Jenkins 2007: 186).

From the preceding discussion, it becomes evident that as long as English, a natural language inherently associated with particular ethnicities and nations, continues to serve as a global lingua franca,

the specter of language inequality is likely to endure. This inequality can manifest in various forms, including the dominance of American and British Standard English or even within the framework of ELF. As a result, some contend that the most equitable solution within the context of a global and multilingual society entails the adoption of an artificial language, rather than continued reliance on a natural language.

3.2.2. Artificial Languages as Lingua Francas

As demonstrated in the example of English discussed earlier, natural languages often fall short of achieving linguistic equality due to the presence of native speakers of the language. Consequently, Hülmbauer et al. (2008: 27) provide a definition of a lingua franca as a language that serves as a bridge between individuals who lack a shared native language or culture. In this context, a lingua franca is expected to be a ‘neutral’ language, facilitating communication among speakers who are unfamiliar with each other’s languages.

There have been numerous endeavors to formulate artificial languages for the global community.³ Among these artificial international auxiliary languages (IALs), this section will provide a brief overview of two prominent examples: Esperanto and Unish.

Esperanto, regarded as the most successful IAL to date, was introduced in 1887 by Dr. Zamenhof, a Polish ophthalmologist. Driven by his vision of a language characterized by simplicity, political neutrality, and independence from cultural bias, Zamenhof aspired to foster peace within the war-ravaged Europe of his time (Patterson & Huff 1999: 444). Esperanto exhibits marked influences

³ Artificial languages have been created for many purposes besides international communication (see Gobbo 2008).

from the Romance, Germanic, and Slavic language families in Europe, in addition to Ancient Greek and Latin (Gobbo & Marác 2021: 79). Upon its introduction, Esperanto garnered widespread support and remained a subject of considerable academic and public interest until the 1970s. There were even deliberations regarding its potential adoption as an official language of the EU, although this proposition never came to fruition, and interest gradually waned. Nevertheless, Esperanto has successfully evolved into a living language, boasting a substantially larger population of speakers than any other AIAL. Estimates of the global number of Esperanto speakers have fluctuated significantly, ranging from a conservative estimate of 100,000 to more expansive figures exceeding 16 million.⁴

While Esperanto has undeniably achieved remarkable success as an artificial language, it is equally undeniable that it faces limitations when employed as a *lingua franca*. This is attributed, in part, to the substantial influence of English and also to the inherent characteristics of Esperanto itself. For example, Esperanto's lexicon predominantly originates from European languages, excluding English. Its vocabulary is chiefly sourced from Latin, Ancient Greek, and French, supplemented by contributions from German, Russian, English, and Polish. Additionally, there are some incorporations from Hungarian, Finnish, and Turkish (Gobbo 2005: 16–17). The construction of Esperanto's vocabulary with a pronounced European-centric orientation can render it unfamiliar and challenging for individuals outside of Europe to acquire. The fact that Esperanto predominantly draws its vocabulary from specific languages raises questions regarding its impartiality and neutrality as a global *lingua franca*.

⁴ These estimates are based on various sources, including membership statistics, sales data of Esperanto textbooks, interviews, surveys, and more recently, data such as Internet community activity and search volume (Wandel 2015).

In an effort to overcome the limitations associated with languages like Esperanto, endeavors have been undertaken to create artificial languages that incorporate vocabulary from a more diverse array of languages. One such example is Unish, a contemporary international auxiliary language developed to address the shortcomings of existing linguistic models. Unish, an abbreviation for ‘Universal Language’ or ‘Universal English’, has been under active development at Sejong University in Korea since 1995. The research team at Sejong University embarked on this project with the belief that constructing an artificial language emphasizing regularity and drawing from commonalities among multiple natural and artificial languages would facilitate the acquisition process for learners (Kwak 2003). Thus far, Unish has meticulously crafted approximately 14,800 words through a rigorous vocabulary selection process, incorporating elements from 14 natural languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and one artificial language—Esperanto. Unish’s grammar adheres to fundamental principles of simplicity, logicity, and regularity, designed to enhance ease of learning and utilization (Choo 2001, Lee 2002, Moskovsky & Libert 2004, Park & Tak 2017, Park & Chin 2020, Tak 2020). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Unish remains a work in progress and has yet to establish its own speech community, limiting its recognition compared to Esperanto, which has enjoyed a more established presence (Duranti 1997: 82, Gobbo 2005: 8).

Artificial languages such as Esperanto and Unish, by virtue of their lack of native speakers, arguably offer more effective platforms for promoting linguistic equality and linguistic justice compared to natural languages like English. Nevertheless, this very advantage can also present a potential limitation, as the absence of native speakers may constrain their impact and widespread adoption. Consequently,

while these artificial languages may not represent an exclusive solution to communication challenges in our increasingly multilingual society, they do occupy a notable position within Jørgensen's toolkit for facilitating multilingual and transnational communication.

4. Conclusion

The dynamics of multilingualism in our globalized society necessitate a profound examination of the tools and strategies available for fostering effective communication across linguistic boundaries. This paper has delved into the advantages and challenges associated with multilingualism, shedding light on the critical role of language in shaping societies and relationships. It has explored the benefits of multilingualism, not only at the individual level, where cognitive advantages and enhanced communication opportunities abound, but also at the societal level, where multilingualism is recognized as a catalyst for social inclusion and justice.

However, this paper has also highlighted the inherent complexities and potential pitfalls of multilingualism, especially when it intersects with issues of inequality, language hierarchies, and the preference for native speaker norms. The discussion has led to an examination of two contrasting approaches for facilitating multilingual communication: the use of natural languages like English, which dominates the global linguistic landscape but perpetuates linguistic inequality, and the development of artificial languages such as Esperanto and Unish, which offer linguistic neutrality but face challenges in achieving widespread acceptance.

While acknowledging the limitations of both natural and artificial languages in addressing the multifaceted challenges of multilingualism,

it is evident that these artificial languages occupy a unique position in facilitating equitable and just communication. Their lack of native speakers presents opportunities for linguistic equality and neutrality, yet their relatively limited recognition and adoption underscore the enduring dominance of natural languages.

In essence, the journey through this paper has highlighted the complex interplay between linguistic diversity, equality, and justice in our contemporary world. As societies continue to evolve into multilingual entities, the quest for effective communication tools remains ongoing. It is apparent that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, but rather a need for a diverse toolkit that encompasses natural and artificial languages alike. In this context, Esperanto and Unish, among other artificial languages, emerge as promising instruments in the pursuit of equitable and inclusive multilingual communication. Their development and utilization may not represent the ultimate panacea, but they do contribute valuable dimensions to the ongoing discourse surrounding linguistic diversity and the quest for a more just and communicatively connected world.

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