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BILINGUALISM AS A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROBLEM  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ESTONIA AND ITS NEIGHBORS

I

One of the main objectives of human life should be the development of everything that is positive in man, everything positive inherent in each individual. The right to personal identity should be one of the basic human rights — and personal identity includes also ethnic, linguistic, and cultural components. Therefore, in the evaluation of bilingualism and biculturalism we should also consider whether and to what extent bilingualism may help 1) a people to obtain and maintain its ethnic identity and 2) individuals to reach and maintain their personal identities.

Today international communication has become so common that *foreign language* teaching, command of languages other than one's mother tongue, and having acquaintances, friends, and even relatives of other nationalities can be part and parcel in the life of an ordinary person. What used to be accessible only to privileged classes and scholars a hundred years ago has become available, and to a certain extent inevitable, to the man in the street. This is true at least for the more advanced parts of the world, in any case for Northern and Central Europe. This situation may easily

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create the illusion that things have always been so, and this is indeed the most natural state for things to be in. Also, as we know from history, people have been wandering about far and wide in search of new and better pastures, mixing, assimilating and getting assimilated, trading, learning from each other both knowledge and skills, etc. That is really the way things are: a permanent mass contact with other peoples is at least characteristic of times of social confusion, revolutions, and wars, and of their consequences. Yet, can the same be said of periods of peaceful contacts between nations? Let us try to imagine the rural society in the Nordic countries about one hundred and fifty years ago. This was a rather static society. As far as linguistic contacts were concerned, in many of the Nordic regions and also in some places in Central Europe an ordinary peasant could live his whole life without continuous contact with any foreign language, and consequently, without a need to know one. This kind of life is still characteristic of large areas in China.

Comparing the situation just described with the rather feverish lines of communication becoming ever more rapidly the norm in the present-day society we can observe analogous changes taking place in the legal and material spheres: What 150 years ago was accessible to only the privileged has become (or is in the process of becoming) a natural feature of civilized life with all of its conveniences and blessings, but also with its strains and stresses (I mean possibilities of travel, obligatory education, participation in social control, etc.).

No doubt the international openness of modern life has made it also more human, more interesting, and spiritually more enjoyable than life in a closed society. But it is hardly easy to prove that such internationally saturated life is also more natural in the sense of the linguistic life of an individual. Perhaps with a certain reservation one could even advance the opposite argument: multilingual communication increases psychological tensions. In a way the modern situation also adds to the inequality of people, as it favors those individuals who happen to have good personal, social, or educational advantages in international communication and in situations of foreign language acquisition.

Of course this is not to say that command of foreign languages should be considered something strange and totally unbecoming

to human nature. This could be disproved even by the mere existence of linguistically talented people, let alone by the polyglots. At the same time there is no reason to suspect that a perfect or a near-perfect command of a foreign language should be considered natural and feasible for everyone, if only the society provided the necessary motivation and the proper facilities. For as we all know, the existence of people without any talents for foreign language learning whatsoever is as irrefutable a fact as the existence of born polyglots.

Over the past few years, including the Nordic countries, the world has witnessed a tendency to idealize bi- and multilingualism as the allegedly normal state of the socio-linguistic environment. A more sceptical view could easily be labelled nationalistic, racist, and xenophobic. Idealists praised even the Soviet national nihilism. There are cases, however, where the pro-bilingualist tendencies have a clear-cut political and propagandist background. In the Soviet Union, bilingualism was long and to the very end a means of assimilating the non-Russian peoples (and a change will probably be long in coming). Consequently, one could view bilingualism through rose-colored spectacles for various reasons: either from the point of view of a naive idealist or from the point of view of the so-called Soviet internationalist who used bilingualism only as a cover for national tyranny.

A society that is open to international communication is more receptive to change and certainly receives more and more various impulses and stimuli for development than does a static closed society. Yet what is decisive is the availability of various options. A totalitarian regime may mould relations between nations in such a Procrustean way that all natural development is either cut short or directed into the streambed of assimilation. This circumstance is sometimes especially hard to understand: in different social conditions one and the same phenomenon may acquire a radically different meaning. Bilingualism is such a facet of social life that had different aims as well as different consequences for a western democracy and for a Soviet totalitarian state.

In western democracies bilingualism is a free choice to a considerable extent, it is not so predetermined, its aims are more positive, including the preservation of an individual's national and

personal identity (although one should certainly not idealize the situation in the West either).

In the totalitarian Soviet society bilingualism was a one-way ticket: the state policy favored only the bilingualism of the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union, waving the slogan "Russian is our second mother-tongue!", while the true aim was the assimilation of whole nations. This, however, meant also the suppression or impairment of the personal identity of many of its citizens, as the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities are, by all means, important components of one's personal make-up. The above statements are important enough to be elaborated further on.

To me the argument that for a child development in a bi- or multilingual — and multicultural — environment is only normal from the point of view of developmental psychology looks highly doubtful. In any case the argument is obviously impossible to prove. It seems rather more probable that the child is psychologically programmed to acquire one language rather than several languages at one and the same time. And if this is true, a multilingual environment turns out to be a source of extra stresses, the relaxation of which requires special conscious efforts. In this case it goes without saying that for a child a multicultural environment with its conflicts of different beliefs, customs, and traditions may serve as a permanent source of serious bewilderment. As the existence of people with big linguistic talents is a fact, and so is the existence of people with no linguistic talents whatsoever, this fact should obviously be considered by schools and other educational establishments, as is of course done to a certain degree by various curricula of science — and humanities — biased schools, but apparently this is not sufficient.

In addition, it is evidently necessary to differentiate between the talents in the use of one's mother-tongue and those necessary for language learning. On the one hand, people ideally proficient in their mother-tongue may not always be strong in foreign languages. On the other hand, polyglots are often rather tongue-tied in their mother-tongue. Therefore, inequality in linguistic talents is a fact also to be considered in the actual language policy wherever bilingualism is concerned.

## II

*Bilingualism* may be made *language* policy on the state level. In this case the state often aims at the total propagation of bilingualism among the minorities, while the ultimate aim is their assimilation. Such a policy of bilingualism is a dangerous threat to the national identity of the minority peoples as well as to the personal identities of the ethnic representatives of those minorities. An assimilative policy always produces a large numbers of split personalities.

A voluntary non-totalitarian bilingualism, however, does not present a danger in either sense, since it means a command of a foreign language as a necessary tool for modern life. In most cases, however, bilingualism is not interpreted as foreign language teaching in schools, and neither does it actually mean a better or worse command of a foreign language or the use of a foreign language either professionally or on special occasions. The bilingualism of a society, state, or territory is understood as the situation where the members of the society, the citizens of the state, or the inhabitants of the territory inevitably have to use more than just one language in there everyday life. Typical environments where bilingualism is a condition at least to a certain extent vital for the functioning of the society are as follows: multinational countries, territories with a mixed population, colonized and occupied nations or territories, and territories inhabited by immigrants. This was known already to the Mesopotamian civilizations.

Modern bilingualism, however, has certain historical peculiarities that may give rise to a few social and political problems that were unknown or little realized in earlier times. In the following discussion those problems are treated on a generalized and abstract level. The concrete examples will be taken from the language policies as practiced in the former Soviet Union, Estonia, and Finland — and also from some changes in those policies. One of the cornerstones in the subsequent discussion will be the relationship between the individual and the state (society). In this respect one should pay attention to the following aspects of bilingualism:

*first*, bilingualism may be either individual or state-organized;  
*second*, bilingualism may be either bilateral (two-way, symmetric) or unilateral (one-way, asymmetric);

*third*, bilingualism may be either total, encompassing the whole society, or concerning a clear-cut section (part) of the society (more often the suppressed part or the minorities);

*fourth*, bilingualism may be either complete or partial in the sense of language proficiency.

Another basic criterion for the evaluation of bilingualism and its meaning is the relation of bilingualism and biculturalism to an individual's personal identity, notably, whether or not bilingualism helps one to attain and maintain his or her personal identity, whether or not it helps to disclose and unfold the aptitudes and capabilities lying dormant in any man — or vice versa, whether bilingualism is a factor retarding the person's development and dimming the outlines of his or her personality.

Today bilingualism, or the requirement of knowing a foreign language, is mostly planned and directed on state levels. The state organization of the society usually took it for granted that either the whole population or a certain fixed part of it (for example the minorities or the suppressed ethnic groups), or a part of them (civil servants, etc.) became bilingual to the extent that it guaranteed normal verbal communication within that particular community. This is quite an acceptable requirement, which, however, creates a lot of social tension as 1) it usually is accompanied by some other social and individual inequalities and national discrimination; and 2), state-planned bilingualism overlooks the differences in the linguistic talents of different people. In a bilingual community people to whom foreign-language learning does not come so easily may find themselves among second-rate people despite their having some other qualities useful for the community in question. This is a typical problem among emigrants who do not find the proper deployment of their abilities in their new places of settlement (e.g., the top Estonian writers in Sweden had to earn their living as archivists). Such bilingualism suppresses both one's ethnic and personal identities.

Such problems cannot arise if bilingualism is considered just a matter of private choice. Even if such voluntary bilingualism

encompasses whole social strata (like, e.g., the Russian-French bilingualism widely spread among the nobility of tsarist Russia) its problems are mostly educational, they are kept within private homes or boarding schools, and the solution of these problems finds momentum in the whole social situation. A mixed marriage would usually favor the avoidance of linguistic conflicts and guarantee that the children learn either one of the languages (or more) in a psychologically stress-free atmosphere. As we know, in this case linguistic role-assignment is of much help (i.e., there is a fixed pattern as to which language is used with whom and in what situation).

There is a vast difference in whether bilingualism is pursued under good social guarantees or in poor conditions. If a mixed family has little or no time, possibilities, knowledge, or willingness necessary for tackling their children's language problems, their children have to suffer much more considerable linguo-psychological pressure than they otherwise would, and this creates ground for conflicts that might impair the children's linguistic development. The situation is especially grave if one of the languages is of a lower social status than the other. This was unfortunately observed in several regions of the Soviet Union, where Russian—non-Russian marriages were very frequent, and the prestige language was Russian alone (perhaps the same situation obtained in the relatively recent past in Finnish-Lappish mixed marriages). If this were only a problem of a child's linguistic development, i.e., overlooking his identity and cultural adjustment difficulties, the simplest solution would probably be the education of the child in only one language, the dominant one. But identity problems cannot be overlooked.

We know that many emigrants (including, to some extent, also the Estonians living in the West) have preferred the dominant language of their new habitat. Often, however, such purely rational decisions by the parents have also met with a negative reaction on the part of their teenage or adult descendants, who feel robbed of a part of their personal identities and cultural belongings (as is true of many a young Estonian descendant of emigrants).

To sum up what has been delineated: State-planned bilingualism is a means of oppression that can suppress the expression of

ethnic identity as well as hinder the development and preservation of one's personal identity. Particularly hard hit are those who do not learn foreign languages easily, whereas a free individual choice for bilingualism creates less frequently conflicts in national identity, and can even further the formation of the individual's identity. Bilingualism on such a state level may be symmetric or asymmetric. In the former case the requirement of knowing the other language spoken in a territory (of mixed populations) is similar for both ethnic groups concerned, whereas in the latter the representatives of one ethnic group must speak the language of the other (dominant) nation, but not the other way around. The situation might be further complicated by the circumstance that the political, cultural, and quantitative domineering need not correlate at all. In Estonia, for example, the dominant position is occupied by Estonian culture (and foreign influence is at least translated into Estonian), but in spite of that Russian as the language of the politically domineering nation was forced upon Estonians for half a century, whereas the Russian community, however marginal for Estonian culture, did not need to learn much Estonian. It was simply enough to know Russian. The political and cultural statuses of the two languages have been in direct conflict (and hence the desperate, though not very successful, attempts by the Communist Party to increase the role of Russian in the cultural life of Estonia). In Finland, however, the requirements of the second-language competence at least for certain civil servant positions are more or less symmetric. There is really no linguistic discrimination due to differences in social status: both languages are prestigious culturally. And yet it does not exclude linguistic tensions, linguistic personality problems, or migration-induced changes in the linguistic situation. In Finland it is characteristic that the importance of the languages in bilingual communities (*kunta*) can be reranked, mostly to the disadvantage of Swedish and Saami (Lappish) (in its southernmost speech communities).

In the *Soviet Union* bilingualism used to be part of a state-controlled Russification policy, i.e., the policy aimed at the formation of a unified Soviet nation with a Russian-based culture. In accordance with that basic goal, an asymmetric, one-way bilingualism was propagated in the Soviet Union. This meant that in non-Russian



areas the aim was set upon the achievement of a general competence in the Russian language, and the either voluntary or involuntary immigrants did not need to learn the local languages, as for them Russian alone would do fine. This policy never changed, and might not change soon under the current conditions: as we know one of Moscow's tenets was the internal policy that a Soviet citizen should feel at home in any corner of his vast homeland, whatever the nationality of the local inhabitants. The local inhabitants had to understand the newcomers, but not vice versa. And such an ideology was sometimes even interpreted as one of the basic human rights!

Paradoxically, even under the conditions of one-way bilingualism the language of a Soviet republic could be represented as an official language. Thus in several republics (including the Baltic ones, Georgia, and to a great extent also Armenia) the local language of the republic was widely used in nearly all spheres of public life, including the universities and scientific research. And yet, due to the consistently one-way language policy, plus the state-favored migration policy, things started to gradually shift toward a situation where ethnic Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were expected to know Russian, whereas the Russians who had arrived to live and work in the Baltic countries were not required to know Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian respectively (even when the immigrants worked as pediatricians, psychologists, salespeople, postal clerks, etc.). Changes in the national composition of a traditionally mononational country (esp. Estonia) is a serious national, psychological, and even an economic problem. One-way bilingualism means obviously grave injustice to the indigenous people and a favor to the immigrants. Such a policy aims only at assimilation. This is why it was bound to create national tensions that could be suppressed only by force or threats.

One-way bilingualism, the basis of the Soviet bilingual policies, is, no doubt, vitally dangerous to the personal identity and dignity of the individuals who happen to belong to an ethnic group targeted for such obligatory bilingualism. In the first place, those people must experience the lower status of their own language as compared with the higher status of the dominating language (in the Soviet Union Russian). In the second place, they get no encouragement

to incorporate the treasures of their own language and culture into their personalities, as both their mother-tongue and the culture based on it are degraded to a second-rate status; in the worse case the speakers even feel ashamed to speak it (as e.g. in Mordovia, Chuvashia, and Byelorussia). The void from belittling one's own language and culture is, of course, consciously filled with the dominant language and culture (with Russian-based culture in the Soviet Union). This, however, is usually not acquired completely by the first generation of the bilinguals, and this contributes to the identity problem. It seldom happens that the first generation achieves full command of the new language, but as their mother-tongue has lost its prestige it will not be known adequately either. The result can be called *semi-lingualism* in which neither language is really well known to their users. In Byelorussia and Chuvashia, for example, such a situation has been described as a mass inadequacy of verbal self-expression, accompanied by a low level of cultural interests and a relatively worse preparation and readiness for participation in social life.

Bilingualism looks quite different in a democratic society if it is symmetric and if the dominated language is not disparaged. This could be, in an ideal case, the Finnish-Swedish relationship in Finland. Of course, an actual symmetric bilingualism with no bad feelings toward either language is not a hundred-percent truth in democratic societies either. In Finland, the advantages of the Swedish language are not as efficacious as those of Finnish (which, in a certain sense, is also quite normal), while the bilingualism of the Saami people is, to a large extent, also inevitably, one way (all the Saami know Finnish, whereas only a few Finns living in Lapland can speak Saami equally well).

One-way (asymmetric) bilingualism represents a great danger to the preservation of the languages and cultures of the bilingual peoples. Beside direct assimilation there is also the more covert (but all the more dangerous) process of the structural assimilation of the languages in contact. The dominated language may continue in use, having however borrowed many essential features from the dominant one on the level of morphological and semantic deep structures. I know of cases where such a situation has been idealized

in the Soviet Union and proposed as one of the aims of the official language policy (Academician Oleg Trubachov). But the phenomenon is known everywhere, it is e.g. observable in Finnish influence on Saami structure.

A two-way (symmetric) bilingualism presents a smaller danger of assimilation as the languages and cultures concerned are more equal politically and socially, but nevertheless, widespread bilingualism makes mutual linguistic and cultural influences rather inevitable.

Another important dimension of bilingualism is no doubt its mass character. Voluntary bilingualism is seldom as widespread as to encompass a whole nation. Voluntary bilingualism develops in normal situations of human contact and in such cases it does not involve clearly expressed political motives. A state-controlled bilingualism, however, is meant to pursue the bilingualism of whole nations with the ultimate aim of monolingualism through the dominant language. Many Soviet advocates of total bilingualism did not even try to mask this ultimate aim (Academician Yulian Bromley, for example). An intermediate stage on the way to total monolingualism is the ousting of the dominated language from social and cultural life into the kitchens (Dr. M. Guboglo).

So, mass bilingualism is dangerous to ethnic identity. Due to the suppression of the ethnic component in a personality bilingualism may — in non-democratic societies — be also dangerous to one's personal identity.

In discussing bilingualism one cannot ignore measures of assessing the level of second-language competence. Elementary, good, and perfect (native) levels in a foreign language could perhaps be differentiated. The command of a foreign language is, of course, a feature enriching every personality without any complications on the identity level. Foreign language proficiency on the mother-tongue level, however, may involve an identity problem, especially if the mother-tongue is in a politically and socially suppressed position.

### III

For a democratic and for a totalitarian society the aims and consequences of bilingualism may differ radically. Bilingualism can

be a linguistic, social, political, or personal problem. All these different aspects are interconnected. Even the linguistic aspect depends on the social conditions, the state politics, and one's personal qualities. In the modern world, however, the social and political aspects dominate in the attitudes toward bilingualism, while the political evaluation of any phenomenon depends on the political viewpoint. As I have underlined before, the aims of bilingualism can be totally different depending on whether we have a democratic or a totalitarian society. In a democratic society bilingualism is mostly a means of preservation of the ethnic identity of a group of people, whereas in a totalitarian society bilingualism serves assimilation.

In a totalitarian society one-way bilingualism is also a means of creating linguistic privileges and linguistic discrimination, which pave the way for social privileges and social discrimination. Many people have probably been led astray by the slogan often repeated by the Russian chauvinists in the Baltic countries: "Give us bilingualism!", for what is actually meant is a demand for one-way bilingualism. Another slogan of the Russian chauvinists runs "We demand an end to linguistic discrimination!" and it means nothing else but a protest against the symmetric requirements of bilingualism (or second-language competence) in the service occupations enacted by the language laws adopted in 1989 in the Baltic states. Such slogans have sometimes been misinterpreted even in Finland, and other Western countries, where the Estonians have sometimes been advised to give way to the bilingualist pretensions of the Russians. In reality they did not demand real bilingualism, but a right to manage everything in Russian, without the necessity of any knowledge of any other language.

Bilingual education may have rather different results depending on whether it is carried out in a prosperous or in a poor society. In the former case a child finding himself in a bilingual situation can be surrounded with attention and understanding, whereas a poor society can hardly afford it. Differences in the average educational level only add to the inequality. This is why bilingualism in a small Byelorussian or Bashkirian town is in no sense the same as the Swedish-Finnish bilingualism in Vaasa or Haaparanta.

Even though every generalization involves also a certain distortion of our idea of reality, let us now summarize what has just been said, by a concise list of the differences between the corresponding situations in the former Soviet Union, Estonia, and Finland.

In the Soviet linguistic policy bilingualism was (up and through the new language law of 1990)

- state-controlled;
- one-way (meant mainly for the non-Russians);
- of a mass character (in non-Russian areas);
- aimed at a perfect command of the other language (remember the “two mother-tongues” of non-Russians);
- aimed at the weakening of one’s national identity;
- (as a consequence) aimed at the weakening of one’s personal identity.

Everything that has just been said about the Soviet language policy also applies to the language policy carried out in Estonia and other Baltic states up till the end of 1988. Under the control of the Communist Party Estonia was subjected to the policy of assimilation (called “the fight against nationalism”). It is no fault of the Communist Party that the policy did not succeed.

Since 1989 language policy has undergone considerable changes in Estonia:

- administratively bilingualism is guided to the level of knowing a foreign language;
- the aim is to achieve a two-way (symmetric) bilingualism among those sectors of the population who are occupied with services;
- extensive bilingualism is no longer an absolute goal;
- perfect command of another language has also been abandoned as a general goal; good command of another language is associated with high-ranking positions; the claim of “two mother-tongues” has been acknowledged wrong;
- the strengthening of national identity is being stimulated both among ethnic Estonians as well as among ethnic Russians and representatives of other nationalities;
- one depends on strengthening personal identity (by avoiding the spiritual breaking up due to vagueness of ethnicity or nationality).

Estonian is the only state language, although the position of Russian is strong in the Northeast of Estonia.

As for Finland, the aim of the bilingualism among the ethnic Swedes as well as among the Saami people is evidently the preservation of one's personal identity. Yet in Finland bilingualism is often one-way, as the Swedish speakers are required to have a rather good command of Finnish, whereas there are large monolingual Finnish-speaking areas where a good command of Swedish is not exactly an unconditional prerequisite. The Finnish-Saami bilingualism is even more clearly one way, as the Finns living in Saami areas can manage all right without knowing Saami, even though this hinders them from melting into the local society.