

BILINGUALISM OR THE DEATH OF A LANGUAGE

All too often we forget the meaning of words which, without in themselves undergoing any change, can take on more than one semantic value. This is the case of the word BILINGUALISM, which can mean both “the practice of using two languages alternately” (Weinreich) and “the condition by which two living languages co-exist in one nation” (Aucamp). But neither Weinreich nor Aucamp specify *when, how or by whom* this phenomenon is brought about. To avoid falling into semantic traps, it would be convenient to distinguish between three types of bilingualism: individual, territorial and social.

The first two are not, or at least, should not be destabilizing factors in a community’s linguistic repertory. A person can be bilingual, trilingual or multilingual (polyglot) if he speaks two, three or more languages. A country can become bilingual, trilingual or multilingual when it can be divided into two, three or more communities whose borders are clearly definable on the basis of the languages spoken.

The third type of bilingualism, social bilingualism, can be considered harmful the moment the use of two separate languages by different groups of individuals within the same community provokes a linguistic conflict.

The languages that are in contact become established in different areas of usage. The linguistic conflict emerges when those areas which are considered more prestigious (Media, Teaching, Education) are taken over by the alien language, while the country’s own traditional and natural language is restricted to the less prestigious areas of usage.



Is the linguistic conflict irreversible? No. It can be solved by appropriate linguistic planning combined with a favourable attitude at the political, social and individual levels. However, if this linguistic planning is not carried out, the conflict caused by the languages in contact can lead to the replacement of the weaker language by the stronger. It is also possible that the merging of the two languages might give rise to a mixture, a half-caste language, as a result

of the hybridization of elements from the two. This is what has happened in the case of *Creole* in Haiti, the Seychelles, Mauritius and Reunion Island, *Papiamentu* in Curaçao and the broken English of Sierra Leone.

However, let us now illustrate this theory with a practical example. At present, Catalan overlaps with Spanish, French or Italian, in the various states to which different parts of the Catalan linguistic community belong. The resulting conflict has not followed the same process in each of the states over which it is distributed. In Catalonia North (French state), Alguer (Italian state) and Andorra (where Catalan is the only official language), we can observe a process of linguistic substitution in favour of French, Italian and Spanish and French respectively. The rest of the Catalan linguistic community, included in the Spanish state, is divided among four different autonomous communities: Catalonia South, *País Valencià*, Balearics and the Western Strip, which is included in Aragon. Far from carrying out a common, uniform linguistic policy, each autonomous administration has officialized its own linguistic policy. However, what they all have in common is the fact that the third type of bilingualism (social bilingualism), the

very one which causes linguistic conflict, is elevated to official status. Therefore, what has been officialized is not the normalization of the discriminated language, but the perpetuation of the conflict.

It is of course true that all legal measures taken in favour of normalization are steps towards social reinstatement, but this is not enough, because the conflict has not disappeared. The Catalan speaker is sentenced to bilingualism, but the immigrant who comes from the linguistic area of the official state language is not officially obliged—and much less needs—to live in Catalonia (that is to say, *Països Catalans*) in Catalan when he can live there perfectly well in his native tongue.

If social bilingualism is to be made official by virtue of the people who make up the community, that is to say, respecting the different languages that form part of the community's linguistic repertory, then Catalonia (*Països Catalans*) should not be merely bilingual, but multilingual, since all immigrants ought to have the same legal rights and there should be no discrimination, not even at a linguistic level. One is led to reflect on the case of the African immigrants in the Maresme or Segrià regions, or the immigrant pensioners from Switzerland, Germany, France, Belgium, etc., who live most of the year in our country enjoying the wonderful and much sought after *Spanish sun*. If the authorities base their attitude on the variety within the linguistic repertory, they will have to put the country's own language on an equal footing with the linguistic rights of *all* immigrants. If linguistic policy only favours the language of some of the immigrants and not the others, it



undervalues the latter and, at the same time, the language of the country.

Officialized social bilingualism perpetuates and systematizes the conflict. The case of Ireland will help us to understand this process better. When the Irish free state was created, in 1922, Gaelic, along with English, was given the status of official language. Experience has shown how the country's own language has been pushed to the point of almost total

extinction by the enormous advance of the imposed language: English. The convenience of using one of the two languages necessarily excludes the need to use the other. Consequently, the myth of social bilingualism, whether officialized or not, is a trick. What is needed is a linguistic policy based on the principle of territoriality: only *one* official language corresponds to any given territory—the territory's own, even if other languages are also spoken. On an individual level, everybody should learn as many languages as possible, but on a territorial level, it should be possible to live in the country's own language in all aspects.

In states such as Belgium, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia or Switzerland, each linguistic community lives in its own national language, with no detriment to those citizens who, on an individual level, are bilingual, trilingual or multilingual. These states have opted for the principle of territoriality and have not forced the inhabitants to become *officially* "bilingual".

If the linguistic conflict caused by social bilingualism is to disappear, a community's linguistic policy must be based on the principle of territoriality. Territorial monolingualism is necessary if social bilingualism is not to lead to linguistic genocide.