

POST-NATIONAL LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM: UNIVERSALISING BIAS. EPILOGUE TO THE MONOGRAPHIC SECTION “LANGUAGE AND NEUTRALITY”*

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Abstract

This epilogue suggests that there is a common thread linking the discourses on language and neutrality in the different contexts analysed in this collection of articles. The key idea is that, in all cases, the forces at play transcend the realm of the nation-state and are a direct or indirect response to English’s position as a global hegemonic language. Given that globalisation affects all areas of social life, the former great colonial powers opt for policies to legitimise their own languages and cultures based on diplomatic strategising. Likewise, the implementation of multilingual education formulas at the intra-state level also comes under pressure from many sectors to invest in English. I suggest that the use of the terms *neutral* and *neutrality* mark, in this context, a paradigm shift with respect to modern linguistic nationalisms, since it expresses the need to adopt strategies of equidistance and universalising values in contexts characterised by multilateralism and laying beyond the scope of national sovereignty. I also argue that racial divisions are still a significant factor in cultural diplomacy strategies, while the discourse of the supposed *neutrality* of English masks its role in substantiating neoliberal practices and ideologies.

Keywords: linguistic ideologies; post-nationalism; Hispanophone; Lusophone; Francophonie; Esperanto.

EL NACIONALISME LINGÜÍSTIC POSTNACIONAL: UNIVERSALITZAR LA PARCIALITAT. EPÍLEG A LA SECCIÓ MONOGRÀFICA “LLENGUA I NEUTRALITAT”

Resum

Aquest epíleg proposa un fil conductor dels discursos sobre llengua i neutralitat en els diversos contextos presentats en el recull d'articles. La idea bàsica és que les forces en joc en tots els casos transcendeixen l'àmbit de l'estat nació i responen directament o indirecta a la posició de l'anglès com a llengua hegemònica global. En la mesura en què la globalització afecta tots els àmbits de la vida social, les antigues grans forces colonials opten per polítiques de legitimació de les pròpies llengües i cultures en base a l'acció diplomàtica. Igualment, la implantació de fórmules d'ensenyament multilingüe a nivell intraestatal també es veu tensionada per la pressió de molts sectors perquè s'inverteixi en l'anglès. Proposo que l'ús dels termes neutre i neutralitat marquen, en aquest context, un canvi de paradigma respecte dels nacionalismes lingüístics moderns, ja que apareix la necessitat d'adoptar estratègies d'equidistància i valors universalitzants en contextos caracteritzats per la multilateralitat i fora de la sobirania nacional. També s'observa com les clivelles racials encara marquen significativament les estratègies de diplomàcia cultural, alhora que el discurs de la suposada neutralitat de l'anglès emmascara el seu paper substanciador de les pràctiques i ideologies neoliberals.

Paraules clau: ideologies lingüístiques; postnacionalisme; hispanofonia; lusofonia; francofonia; esperanto.

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1 Introduction

The articles in this issue provide us with an excellent opportunity for understanding many of today's language-related disputes, i.e. the clashes of interests with regard to which languages should have which usages and/or occupy which spaces, given the fact that many human activities now transcend national borders. Maria Rosa Garrido Sardà and José del Valle provide us with a selection of studies documenting the current emergence of new discourses around languages. They suggest taking the notion of neutrality as the basis for understanding these new ways of explaining the functions of languages and the value we attach to them. They have suggested six authors for examining seven differing sociolinguistic situations, in three of which the terms *neutral* or *neutrality* are used explicitly, whilst in the other four they suggest that participants develop neutrality strategies without explicitly saying so.

The argument is dense and complex, because it requires qualification of what is regarded, both implicitly and explicitly, as *neutrality* in each given context. And the contexts are very different: a) the discourses around Esperanto at the beginning of the 20th century, which, above all, foreshadow elements that we will later see in the remainder, b) the arguments over languages in education in multilingual contexts as disparate as those of Switzerland and South Africa, c) the language-related tensions experienced in an organisation, the Red Cross, in its attempts to uphold its neutral status, d) the normative unification efforts in the Spanish and Portuguese linguistic spaces, and e) the constitution of the Francophonie as a field of scientific knowledge.

To be able to situate and assess this interpretative exercise, it is worth noting from the outset two common and closely interrelated threads that we find in all the contributions analysing contemporary phenomena. The first is that all the contexts are associated with international or transnational spaces. The second is that the alleged neutrality has something to do with the English language. There are some arguably exceptions to this. For example, the article on the Hispanophone and Lusophone spaces only makes indirect mention to English. It could also be argued that education-related arguments in Switzerland and South Africa are, in principle, *internal* to the States in question. Nevertheless, these are situations that only become understandable as forms of positioning with regard to what we could call *globalisation* (and economic globalisation, in particular), and to the English language as both the conduit for and the defining principle of this world order.

So, fundamentally, the arguments of Garrido Sardà and Del Valle call on us to understand the language-related dimension of globalisation through the word and the idea of neutrality. It is important for those readers who are not sociolinguistic specialists to understand that none of these authors are talking just about languages, but also about political and economic power (and other forms of power arising therefrom). The idea is that any dispute or idea regarding languages plays a role in the organisation of societies and, as a result, in inequalities. Linguists have for some time now been saying that all languages are equal as a principle. In political practice, however, they never are. All societies hierarchise languages, basically according to those who speak them and the power they wield. So, if English has become an international language, it is due to those who speak it and the power they have, and because there are people who have believed that, by learning and speaking it, they will benefit from sharing the profits (although whether this is actually the case is another matter entirely). Thus, we sociolinguistics read discussions about languages as components in disputes over power. So, the key argument of this selection of articles is that the idea of neutrality is wielded to accrue support and power within a framework of struggles over hegemony by the large language communities on an international level.

Looking at things from a historical perspective can help us understand this better. In the past, the imposition of languages was legitimised on religious grounds (as the language of believers or of the "Book"), by reason of empire (as argued by Nebrija and many others), on the grounds of civilisation (rational as opposed to primitive or barbarous languages) or in the name of freedom and modernisation (the languages of rationality, civilisation and progress as opposed to traditional or archaic languages). This issue's editors and authors wish to make it clear that, these days, things have changed, and now it is the *turn* of leveraging neutrality when seeking to legitimise a given system of linguistic hegemony (and inequality), a hegemony that is not, I repeat, *just* linguistic, but also economic and political.

This hypothesis seems quite reasonable if we bear in mind that the playing field analysed by these different articles is one we call *international*, one in which linguistic arguments and practices cannot be imposed in such a summary fashion as we have seen in nation-states over the course of the last two and a half centuries.

In addition, noting that the different authors do *not* seek a unified idea of neutrality will help us understand the argument.

To make things clearer, neutrality lies not in the substance, but in the form. It is not necessary for everyone to mean the same thing. The editors note how Raymond Williams (1976) stated that the same things go for the key concepts of politics: everyone makes use of concepts such as progress, people or freedom as best suits them in a given situation. This is also the case with *neutral* and *neutrality*. What's needed, then, is to pick up this currently fashionable garment and give it a good tugging, seeing where the seams hold and where they begin to come apart.

2 Neutrality in different times and spaces

An initial, basic semantic outline can help us embark upon this journey, and it is here where the thoughts of Mariana Di Stefano are particularly useful. In her article, Di Stefano notes how bubbling in the hotpot of Esperanto at the dawn of the 20th century were a number of ingredients, from an equidistant standing with regard to the contenders (the European powers), to rationalism as the principle that makes us human and fill further to scientific knowledge as a locus of universally valid utterances, one historically associated with well-being and progress. Nevertheless, the author reminds us that neutrality and what is neutral are nothing more than fictions. Anyone who rummages around seeking their essence are doomed to failure: Bakhtin, Plantin and Barthes all state that neutrality is nothing more than the building of a position that contrasts with others. Another way of explaining this is the etymology of the term: *neuter* comes from how Latin and Ancient Greek called the gender that was neither masculine nor feminine. Morphologically, it is actually the same as the English *neither*. However, in the end, neuter is clearly just another gender, another one in dispute, as was also the case with the anarchists who declined their Esperanto in opposition to the *bourgeois* and *capitalist* languages that stood in the way of universal brotherhood. There is always an alterity in neutrality.

Secondly, behind each and every statement lies someone's work and someone's interests. When we seek to associate any idea with anything else, someone must put work on this association. It requires to be said, and to be said in contexts and ways that get a positive reception. Some *Belle Époque* anarchists and scientists supported Esperanto and used different arguments to justify this amongst themselves. Di Stefano calls the work of making something neutral *neutralisation*, the discursive construction of neutrality. However, this neologism is added to a past meaning of the word that describes actions leaving something without effect: machines that no longer work, substances that cease to corrode, dissolve or insulate, threats evaporated, forces halted, fears or hopes that never materialise. It could be said that neutralisation₁ means leaving something without effect, whilst Di Stefano's neutralisation₂ would consist in presenting an option that is equidistant from the parts of a whole. So, we can also say that, in the tradition of nation-states, there were, implicitly, some supposedly neutral languages that left the other languages of a nation's territory without effect. European nation-states have thus neutralised₂ *national* languages and have neutralised₁ any other ones. When talking about Switzerland and South Africa, Martina Zimmermann and Rocco W. Ronza develop this neutralising role assigned to sovereign institutions that, based on multiple biases, can democratically, and hence legitimately, reach a decision that, from then on, remains unquestionable. This is an idea that has been expounded in other terms by Kathryn Woolard (2016), when she speaks of languages of authenticity and languages of anonymity. *Authentic* languages are minority and traditional ones that have a partiality: they are spoken by specific people with certain characteristics, but not by *normal* people, and are used to speak of specific things, but not just anything. An *authentic* language expresses certain sentimental or artistic values we associate exclusively with the group that speaks it. An *anonymous* language is neutral, that of the State, authorless, owned by no one, aimed only at what is practical and procedural. Michael Billig (1995) puts it another way when he speaks of *banal nationalism*, of how the State ensures that its identity signs end up in circulation without anyone paying much attention to them in their everyday lives, through the use of flags, language, postage stamps, signposting and currency, such that it can mix what is *common* in the *habitual* sense of the word can blend with *the common* as belonging to all of us.

I believe that, to understand contemporary usages of neutrality, it is important to bear in mind that they relate back to the linguistic and political regimes of European States that, from the Enlightenment on, have formalised and systematised the use of languages and cultures as the basis for political legitimation. When rule

shifted from monarchies, whose power was based on wealth and divine right, to States that claim to represent the people, there was a need to implement mechanisms to clarify what (and who) these people were. Nowhere was the idea tackled so explicitly as in revolutionary France, where, at the time of the revolution (1789), the majority of the population actually spoke Occitan. Almost immediately, at the start of the National Convention of 1792, Henri Grégoire presented a plan to make the French language universal and eliminate all the *patois*. Note the rhetorical trick of presenting French in contrast to other forms of speech whose names are not even mentioned. All of this in the name of a universality equivalent to that referred to a century and a half later by the promoters of Esperanto: *l'usage unique et invariable de la langue de la liberté*. Additionally, we can see how states' management of language diversity has tended to create two kinds of invisibility: firstly, they have removed from public spaces all undesirable languages and, secondly, they have imposed such a universal use of the national language that it has become invisible, in Billig's (1995) sense of the word.

In their examination of the cases of Switzerland and South Africa, Zimmermann and Ronza rightly identify the symbolic status of public institutions as places of encounter that are, in principle, for everyone. However, what makes their examples particularly interesting is the fact that both countries are anomalies in comparison with the paradigm of the European nation-state, each for different reasons. Switzerland is a union of small regions that arose due to the need for mutual protection from the aggressivity of surrounding states, with no specific interest in building a cohesive vision of its collective nature. Its multilingual system is the best evidence of this, and a large part of its common institutional framework has been built to maintain this difference and make it compatible with military defence and a fluid economic activity. So, at no point did Switzerland undertake any real internal linguistic or cultural unification, even on a dialectal level, which gave rise to the well-known split between literacy in high German and the retention of an array of demotic varieties referred to as *dialectal*, *Schweizerdeutsch*, something that is increasingly uncommon in other German-speaking areas. Linguistically speaking, Switzerland is not a nation-state, a facet it shares with South Africa, for very different reasons. The case of South Africa has its origins in colonialism, in which European racism rejected (as in all colonies) any option for nationhood based on popular unification. European South African racism simply lasted a little longer than other types of colonial racism through the establishment of apartheid, a bureaucratisation of racial prejudice that echoed some elements of pre-abolition slavery-based regimes.

It is paradoxical to note that the two disputes analysed, those of Switzerland and South Africa, share the same background: the appropriation of English as providing a promise of a brighter future. In Switzerland, efforts to find a place for English put a strain upon the language reciprocity pacts that form part of the country's very foundations. French speakers must study German (or Italian), and vice-versa, but some parts of society are no longer thinking on a purely Swiss level, but of global markets. In South Africa, much the same is the case with many Bantu communities in relation to adopting their own languages as media of instruction, especially given the background of a regime that very deliberately instrumentalised mother tongues to keep the population educationally decapitalised. In the end, taking a language, eliminating any variations and using it to teach, govern, judge, write, etc., is a very European (and Asian) idea, but not such an African one, as Makoni and Pennycook (2007) have explained. Furthermore, colonial languages are already implanted such that they are used to distinguish between social classes in South Africa and many other countries in much the same way.

We can also see that, in both countries, state language governance is focused on the idea that the different language communities (German, French, Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, etc.) must be able to study in their own language. However, the promoters of English are actually not English speakers (even in South Africa, English speakers play only a secondary role). In these contexts, English is literally (almost) nobody's language, in the traditional sense of the expression. This fact shows us one of the ways in which the ideological paradigm of the nation-state is being eroded. It is the English language that is now *anonymous* in Woolard's (2016) sense of the word. Now, if we say that this cannot, discursively, happen spontaneously or by chance, the question has to be: who is it that is making English *anonymous*, and why? As we shall see in the conclusions, this is the question raised by these articles, to be answered by future ones.

Aside from the cases of Esperanto and educational debates, the remaining articles deal with clearly international and diplomatic situations. The case of the International Red Cross, analysed by Maria Rosa Garrido Sardà, depicts one way of exploiting the anomaly that is Switzerland on the international stage. Switzerland has a long history of neutrality (in the classical political sense), in that it is a country that is not really a State (it only

joined the UN in 2002), took no direct part in colonial ventures, is defined in its constitution as non-combatant and does not even have its own language. Switzerland is made up of the adjoining borderlands of three central European political and cultural spaces, ones drift away from their respective centres. It is a confederation that has always been comfortable as, nationally speaking, a non-place, actually making this a point of pride, whilst turning itself into a no-man's land in conflicts, either hosting talks or acting as a mediator.

Is however a problem encountered by the Red Cross, an organisation based in Switzerland, ironically, when it attempts to internationalise itself in terms of its staff members. This process of internationalisation entails recruiting staff from a variety of backgrounds, making mediation a more strictly professional job. However, this change brings to the surface things which had not, until now, been viewed as important: racial and linguistic identity as a source of legitimation for the role of the mediator. The organisation is facing up to the fact that, to date, it was Swiss nationals who had embodied the role of mediators, particularly in post-colonial contexts, in which racial identity is a key component of alterity. However, mobilising racially and linguistically closer people has made some participants doubt said people's detachment from the conflict. Paradoxically, what Garrido shows us is that this tension ended up legitimising the bodies and languages of the colonisers as actors capable of intervening in conflicts, since only Europeans were viewed as credible, even if only due to their theoretical (and debatable) distance from the conflict. This example shows us how neutrality is a condition that needs to be actively worked upon to adapt it into line with each context.

The article by Xoán Lagares allows us to contemplate the emergence of the concept of neutrality at a time when state-based linguistic hegemonies need to take the leap into the international arena, specifically in the case of Spanish and Portuguese. To understand the question of linguistic normativity studied by Lagares, we have to add in another type of European linguistic neutralisations, exemplified above with the case of France. This we can call *internal neutralisation* from the moment at which it affects not so much other language communities over which it has power as the social groups that are, in fact, regarded as forming part of the *national* language community itself.

Given that all linguistic spaces have differing variations in forms of speech, state language unification policies have also tried to neutralise the forms of speech (*dialects*) of the subordinate class, particularly rural inhabitants and workers, to thereby neutralise the forms of speech of the dominant classes. This has been done by imposing a unified form of the language that constitutes the norm, the one that is taught, printed and publicly enunciated.

Both cases constitute historical consequences of their respective colonial ventures in Latin America. Racially, the so-called *mestizaje* became commonplace in a good number of Spanish and Portuguese colonies. *Mestizaje* meant managing racial inequalities not on a categorical basis (as was the case of the Europeans in Africa, India or Southeast Asia, or slavery-based regimes) but on a graded one. The countries that emerged from these colonies feature a white elite which has remained in place on the basis of intermarriage, set against a population whose skin becomes darker the lower the social class. It is therefore important to understand that the Spanish and Portuguese elites on both sides of the Atlantic have the chance to enter into mutual alliances that are simply not found between other colonial "mother countries" and their African and Asian colonies. The former Portuguese and Spanish colonies in sub-Saharan Africa get more or less ignored in the key strategies of their respective linguistic space and we will see how this same situation has a particular impact on the space dubbed the *Francophonie*.

It is these *intraracial* alliances between Hispanophone and Lusophone hegemonic national elites that allow them to conceive of shared linguistic space within which it is possible to raise the issue of the unification of language norms. Remember that this issue simply did not arise within the framework of the original States. However, with the current mindset, the choice has been made to manage it principally through diplomatic channels. It is within this context that the idea of a *neutral* applied to language takes on a specific meaning, as does the work of neutralisation₂. In the case of Hispanic America, as can be seen in the article, the Spanish government manages to uphold the hegemony of Peninsular Spanish with some nuances.

In any case, what we can again see here is that such projects require very active work on neutralisation₂ and that the success of such a venture is never, by a long chalk, guaranteed. Xoán Lagares shows us the contrast between the successful neutralisation₁ of the linguistic variations of Spanish and the failure of the same process within the framework of Portuguese-Brazilian relations. The point of the matter is that the mother no

longer faces variations within its own border, but on an international level: a code identified as common is spoken in different countries and one faces the problem of multiple sources of authority. Each country has its own spontaneous forms of linguistic variation reflecting its own internal class divides. Each country's elite enforces its own linguistic hegemony or the establishment of a locally neutral language, which may diverge from that established in other countries.

The problem is correctly portrayed by the article as a diplomatic issue between different sovereign state elites. It is with this mindset that the figure of the linguist becomes important as a point of articulation upon whose basis it is possible to negotiate what will come to be in the end, like the terms of an international treaty, even if it is not described as such to uphold the fiction that language pre-exists the political regime that implements it. Linguists, specialists and politicians, acting as both parties and judges, supply the corpus of discursive production that can be depicted as being equidistant between them all. This allows for the adoption of the term *neutral Spanish*. A glottopolitical analysis makes it clear, though, that the work of linguists is only of value once assumed by politicians, and it is Spanish diplomacy, not the science of linguistics, that secures the victory. However, success is ensured by maintaining at all times the duality between diplomacy and linguistics, as those who have to dance to the choreography are the academies and academics of the languages, duly incentivised with the necessary funding and logistics.

It is interesting to note how, now that the problematic diversity of the American varieties of Spanish has been politically neutralised¹, the appearance of linguistic and glottopolitical incongruences is of concern to no one (except for the odd linguist). Even if, in the end, criteria differing from those agreed are adopted (coincidentally favouring Peninsular Spanish) and private actors (with Spanish capital) appear on the scene to assume normative tasks that are difficult for official academies to take on (such as the vast number of terminological innovations in the market, coming from English), the system is, in principle, already up and running and it seems possible to contain the problem of internal diversity, at least for the time being.

Alongside Spain's success, Lagares sets the failure of Portugal and Brazil. The author notes that Portuguese has a similar economic base, similar intellectual leaders and also good linguists. What is missing are the diplomatic relations and the political leadership the process requires. It has not been possible to neutralise the differences or create a neutral language to interconnect the two great spaces of political and linguistic legitimacy. As a subsidiary issue, Lagares could have examined the specific role played by certain economic actors, who are highly conspicuous in the Spanish case: energy, communications and construction multinationals, springing from former state monopolies, which support the Spanish State's strategy by financing dictionaries, services, grants and events (see Pujolar, 2020). These companies have set down deep roots in numerous Latin American countries and boast great influence and an ability to act in ways of which the public is currently unaware. This alliance between the State and economic elites is characteristic of nation-states, it is at the origin colonisation and, in the case of Spain, has been reinvigorated since the 1990s.

Lastly, we have the situation examined by Philippe Humbert, associated with the Organisation Mondiale de la Francophonie, the body promoted by France and Canada. Humbert focuses on the important deployment of academic activity associated with the international promotion of French, which has led the two countries to finance the Observatoire de la langue française and the Observatoire démographique et statistique de l'espace francophone. Within these two bodies, and from the publications about academic events, it can be deduced that we find scholars who would identify themselves (to some extent, at least) as *sociolinguists*, even though we can see a predominance of a demographic or *demolinguistic* slant, this latter term closely associated with Quebecois language policy. So it is that the article has a degree of implicit introspection from the moment in which one can observe the specific weight of contemporary academic consensus: depicting a language or an academic activity as neutral is, in principle, something difficult to defend within the grove of academe (even though the use of the term *español neutro* appears to offer little or no cause for concern for Spanish academics). All in all, Humbert's article includes a whole range of neutralisation strategies that would fit within what Di Stefano describes to us as the resorting to academic discourse as a locus of universal enunciation. Whatever the case, it is interesting that the bias of the enterprise gets explicitly recognized, couched as part of a strategy of resistance against the expansion of English, above all through the promotion of French as the working language with former colonies. Some actors also explicitly acknowledge how the analytical orientation stems from the tradition of studies of the application of Quebecois language and migration policy. So, a significant

number of actors invalidate the argument of neutrality, at least as a characteristic of the academic work funded by and disseminated through the institutional framework of the Francophonie.

Additionally, Humbert identifies two specific neutrality strategies. The first lies in attempts to present academic activity as independent or at least not directly influenced by official institutions. The second consists in recruiting multilateral international institutions (and UNESCO in particular) to assume some of these academic bodies' data collection needs. To understand this latter phenomenon, one needs to pay attention to the tensions identified by Humbert that, in the end, stem from the two racial poles of the planet's francophone space: France and Canada on the one hand (with the complicity of Belgium, Switzerland and other European countries) and, on the other, the former colonial possessions in Africa and Southeast Asia. Bearing in mind the fact that the bulk of the activity consists in the collection of census-based data and in the promotion of certain education policies in post-colonial contexts, it is clear that the problems lie in the difficulty in creating solid alliances between States on a diplomatic level, alliances comparable to those found in the Hispanic American interracial space.

3 Discussion

What all these articles have in common is that they show how linguistic regulations are negotiated in contemporary contexts in which the forces at play transcend the traditional boundaries of the nation-state. This can be seen in the education-related debates in Switzerland and South Africa, where actors linked to regional or national institutions are experiencing tensions arising from the globalisation of English as the language of trade, tourism, diplomacy, politics, information, education, culture, etc. The case of the dawn of the Esperanto movement already pointed to the fact that, in forums involving international and multilateral participation, the sources for legitimising language usages could not spring from the ways in which each individual country had imposed its own internal linguistic unification. One hundred years later, we can see how international forums have spread to embrace every field: politics, trade, culture, economics, communication, organised crime, military alliances and much more. And it is in these new forums that we can appreciate the other issue tackled by this article: how these former great colonial powers deploy policies to legitimise and spread the use of their own languages. Hence the appearance of what we could call *cultural and linguistic diplomacy*: the British Council, the Goethe-Institut, the Alliance Française and the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, the Confucius Institutes, the Instituto Cervantes and the Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, the Japan Foundation, the Instituto Camões and, last but not least, the Institut Ramon Llull for Catalan. As Phillipson (1992) and Heller and McElhinny (2018) have explained, in the case of the United States, this strategy has been deployed (predictably enough) through two private foundations: the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation. Even the case of the Red Cross features aspects associated with how its small host country believes it should position itself internationally in defence of peace. The articles in this issue cover a part of the whole, suggesting that its perspective can be broadened still further, although I would personally take a different standpoint, as detailed below.

The terms *neutral* and *neutrality* are noteworthy due to their innovative nature in linguistic discourse, even though they may not explicitly appear in all contexts. However, where the concept is not mentioned, one can divine equivalent strategies of equidistance or recourse to discourses of a universalising, objectivising or similar nature. Broadly speaking, it seems plausible to point to the fact that these discursive strategies come in response to the need to defend one's own interests within a multilateral context. Even if, in many cases, relations of colonial dependency live on in numerous ways, with a greater or lesser level of complicity between elites, it is no longer possible for a former colonial power to impose the savage unilateralism exemplified by the words of Henri Gregoire and the general practice of European linguistic-cultural policies of the nation-states. There is a need to establish a dialogue on the basis of recognising the other party and then you must construct arguments that, at the very least, present proposals that are formally equidistant (ignoring for a moment how the usual factors of brute force and foul play can work their *magic* in international relations, behind the scenes).

We have also seen how the fact that multilaterality requires interests to be represented in terms of neutrality is no impediment to the continuance of some very old implicit exclusion strategies. The most obvious of these is erasure: ignoring the other party. We can see this, particularly, in the way how, in theoretically egalitarian

contexts, colonial-type racial divisions live on, such that the participation of Asian and African actors in Francophone, Hispanophone or Lusophone spaces is kept subordinate. It seems reasonable to think that economic and demographic balancing acts in each of these spaces play their part. In the Lusophone space, it is understandable that Brazil does not allow itself to be led by Portugal, whilst in the Hispanophone space, the Kingdom of Spain has room to manoeuvre in a more balanced constellation of powers. On the other hand, tensions are far more evident in the Francophone space, which is as diverse as the Hispanophone one, but much more marked by racial differences.

Lastly, there is another question not asked in this issue, one that I believe is a necessary complement to the analyses it contains: what constitutes English's neutrality? Who promotes it and in whose interests? In these articles, English appears driven by its own, anonymous and (to a degree) aseptic power. Firstly, we know that it destabilises education plans in Switzerland and South Africa because some sectors of society have an interest in doing so, although we are not told clearly why. Secondly, it constitutes a kind of threat against which the transnational institutions of the three great global linguistic spaces analysed here are arming themselves. The leaders of the Francophonie are the only ones to make mention of a dreaded *homogénéisation anglo-saxonne*. In any case, nobody is asking who is neutralising English, or how, under what terms, with what strategies and in whose interests. We are aware that South Africa has a qualified English-speaking minority but we know very little about the role that this group has played in the linguistic dispute as such, beyond making English one of the available official languages. My guess, however, is that this might not be the right track.

If we accept the premise that all neutralities are the result of someone laying the groundwork for them to be regarded as such, then we need to ascertain what the underlying basis for the neutrality of English is. The current most plausible hypothesis is that of gaining economic advantage. In the studies contained in this article, the presence of English is endemic, without needing to be defended by its own community of speakers, without the need for alliances with language academies, to enlist linguists and writers, mobilise embassies or create language observatories. It is not that there are no comparable initiatives. Some years ago, Robert Phillipson (1992) chronicled the neo-imperialist elements detected in English language teaching practice and institutions. However, my hypothesis is that the key lies not here, but in the consequences of how English has taken over key production spaces in the global economy, politics and culture. It is with the promise of symbolic and economic power that English embodies a great number of contemporary desires. It is the principle that makes the forms of social and individual participation (individual enrichment) offered by the hegemonic neoliberal order unquestionable. Once all the pieces fit together (the promise of enrichment, of physical and social mobility, of global connectedness, of access to cultural assets, of freedom of lifestyle, of instant communication) the new neutrality becomes the universal point of encounter, without practically any room for discussion. The emerging literature on language and neoliberalism has begun to document this present-day ideological formation (Block et al., 2012; Flores, 2013; Holborow, 2015; Martín Rojo & Del Percio, 2019).

Therefore, all these works raise key questions for understanding a contemporary world built on certain ideological bases, and not others, on certain forms of social relations and on certain languages that shape them, and not others. As with all orders in history, some people will end up winners and other losers, there will be promises and deceits, pleasant and unpleasant surprises. It is our job as sociolinguists to take a close look at these promises of progress associated with language communities and assess the extent to which they are justified. We shouldn't fool ourselves however, by saying we shall do so from a position of neutrality, since we will all do so on the basis of some concern or other, be this the revitalisation of our own language community, the inequalities of our surrounding environment, universal brotherhood, climate change or space exploration, or simply personal enrichment. It is not our place to judge anyone, but rather to help people understand which neutrality they have to live through.

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