Traditional and New Linguistic Management: Political and Economic Implications. The Case of Intercomprehension

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Human Rights and Diversity: New Challenges for Plural Societies

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Introduction
Eduardo J. Ruiz Vieytez

The limitation of democratic principles to the interior of each of the States that comprise international society has carried with it an inevitable adulteration of these principles. The dominant liberalism of the last two centuries has not only legitimized the structuring of political power in nation-States but has done whatever possible to extend this division to all areas of the planet and to organize the present-day international community around it. This has meant that within the framework of each national society, the political structures were seriously conditioned by the dominant parameters of identity in each case, which at the same time has meant that human rights, theoretically universal, cannot be applied except through canons of interpretation which each dominant group has imposed in its respective space. In this sense, discerning the authentic meaning of certain human rights is a need that has been felt for a long time, inasmuch as all countries incorporate, to a greater or lesser degree, different sources of diversity. While this is true, it is no less true that, once the ideological conquests of liberalism and socialism seem to have been consolidated, the greatest challenge now faced by reflections on human rights is that of cultural or identity justice. The present-day panorama in which, starting with societies that are already plural, there are important movements of population which increase diversity, demands a deep reframing of our most basic concepts of coexistence and the adaptation of the idea of democracy to a multicultural reality.

The idea of diversity implies the assumption of differences between human beings, between groups of people identified by more or less concrete elements: cultures, languages, religions, values or beliefs, life directions, physical aspects, capacities, and so forth. They exist despite a series of differentiating criteria, involved in the definition of social groups, that are not necessarily relevant as regards the organization of public space; while, on other occasions, the criteria that mark these differences are relevant only to the extent that they reflect inferiorities or disadvantages that affect certain groups exclusively, regardless of their position in one or other specific society. Nevertheless, there are also certain elements that form a substantive part of what we call collective identities and which, considered in themselves, do not imply a situation of disadvantage or inferiority with respect to other human beings. They are factors like language or religion which constitute
Traditional and New Linguistic Management: Political and Economic Implications, the Case for Intercultural Understandings

Francois Grin

1. Introduction

In contrast to other papers in this collection, this paper is not primarily concerned with the normative questions that normally surround the thematic area of human rights. Rather, it examines one linguistic management solution whose adoption would have direct bearing on the more or less equitable, or fair, character of communication between people having different mother tongues. And fairness is, of course, a relevant issue in any discussion of human rights.

“Linguistic management” is at the heart of the endeavour generally known as “language policy”. Language policy, however, covers a wide range of interventions, normally by the state or its surrogates. It would be well beyond the scope of this paper to attempt a general account of what language policies are about, even under the more specific angle of the economic approach to language policies.

In order to address “new” linguistic management, this paper emphasises one particular language planning strategy, and proposes a preliminary economic assessment of it. The case in point is that of “intercultural comprehension”, that is, the use of receptive competences in foreign (but usually related) languages, enabling participants in a multilingual exchange to speak their own language and yet be understood by other participants who have acquired receptive skills in this language. The term “intercultural comprehension” itself does not seem to have gained currency in English-speaking countries, and its use in English appears to be confined to special-