Derrida’s *Le monolinguisme de l’autre*: Linguistic Educational Rights

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*I have only one language, it is not mine.*

These words pronounced by Jacques Derrida in 1992 describe a personal experience and hark to problems of linguistic rights, the right to education in one’s native language, as well as in other languages, and in the language of the other.

As I was writing this paper last June while in France, the assassination of Lounès Matoub was announced. A champion of the Berbère language and identity, Matoub had become an international hero through his poetry and songs, and a threat to the Algerian fundamentalist movement. He was assassinated in retaliation for his political activism and the Kabyle resistance against the imposed Arabization of Algeria (July 1998), making this one more example of violence associated with the violation of linguistic human rights and attempts at cultural uniformization and assimilation. Already we are all too familiar with the tribute media have paid to strategies of “ethnic cleansing” in Europe and Africa.

This essay proposes to explore Derrida’s *Le monolinguisme de l’autre* to discuss the impossibility of absolute monolingualism demanded by linguistic imperialism, and the multiplicity inherent in any language. It addresses the double interdict to which Derrida believes education must respond, and the double entitlement for which it is responsible.

THE OTHER LANGUAGE: LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM

*This language, the only one I am thus destined to speak….this sole language, you see, will never be mine.* (ML, 14)

Minority status is not simply determined by numbers. Rather it is a matter of power relations between groups. Furthermore, one should not assume that all minorities seek assimilation, as some are eager to maintain their distinctiveness, and transmit their culture and language to the next generations. However, whatever their status, minorities must use the dominant language: this is the only language they have to communicate, either it is enforced, and/or because it is necessary for communicating outside the immediate community.

Africans brought to North America as slaves came to realize that “Everything of Africa that we had including language was taken away from us.” Folasadé Oládélé confirms that “We have no country but this one, no education but the one offered here, no language but English.” The politics of assimilation discouraged Africans from speaking anything but the language of the master. They now find themselves confined within its boundaries because it does not allow them “to express themselves in their totality.” Thus they have one language only, and it is not theirs.

In most cases, this other language was imposed more or less violently. Whole populations were coerced into renouncing their native languages and speaking the
language imposed “by force or wiliness…through rhetorics, schools or military conscription” (ML, 45). Derrida talks about “political and historical terror, …the wounds, the scars…murders and even collective assassinations” (ML, 48-49). In American history, violence through and about language has been widely documented. James Crawford reports on Indian children “removed from their reservations, often forcibly, and shipped to faraway boarding schools, where they were subjected to corporal punishment if caught speaking their native languages.” In those schools, “[they] were taught to despise every custom of their forefathers, including religion, language, songs, dress, ideas, methods of living.”

Undoubtedly members of any group need to maintain and value their native language, as well as the particular English code they use (“Black English,” “Village English,” “Heritage English”); but they also need to be educated in the dominant language (“Formal English”) in order to communicate as broadly as possible. Paradoxically, access to literacy often coincides with access to an alien language. Suzanne Drassus stresses how it is instruction in the colonizer’s language which enabled her people to escape slavery—not just the “legal, official” kind of slavery, but also a sort of intellectual and psychological alienation; because it is this language which enabled them “to discover others, to read what is elsewhere, to become informed and educated.” For Maya Angelou, education was also the key to liberation from silence, loneliness, oppression, and abuse. Through the poetry and caring that her teacher, Mrs. Flowers, brought into her life, Angelou mastered the “master’s” language, and made it sing to her own melody.

In Amadou Kourouma’s experience, liberation through another language took a different form: “As a representant of Black Africa, I must add that writing has been a weapon for us.” He explains how under colonization, they were considered “somewhat like men who did not quite have all the qualities, all the attributes of men.” Consequently, the first Black African writers wanted to show that “they were quite complete, quite accomplished” indeed. However, they had to wait for the génération de la négritude to be recognized as having a distinct and specific culture. Kourouma believes that this is what enabled them to fight for independence. But after independence was acquired, dictators took over, and took away the liberties they had gained. Once more, they turned to writing, and in the “dictators’” own language condemned them. “In that sense, writing …was for us liberatory: enabling us to be heard,…acknowledged.” Though their relationship with language is different, more antagonistic, bell hooks discusses how English has also been used as a “weapon” by “black people” who “claimed [it] as a site of resistance.”

Whether used as the result of some necessity, coercion, or liberatory act, the other language must be appropriated. In Le monolinguisme de l’autre, Derrida discusses ownership and appropriation of a language. He sees the latter as a necessary step: “liberation, emancipation, revolution will necessarily be the second round” (ML, 46). Hooks points out how African Americans transformed the “oppressor’s language” and did so not merely to “enable rebellion and resistance.” For in the process, they “created an intimate speech that could say far more than was permissible within the boundaries of standard English…[forging] a space for
alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies—different ways of thinking and knowing.”

One can escape a coercive linguistic situation by trying to appropriate the other language, but not without risks. Drassus articulates the most serious danger: “what I believe is important in this matter is not to feel dispossessed of our self.” Out of his personal experience, described in *Le monolinguisme de l’autre*, Derrida arrives at a “hypothesis” which is a doubt: because he believes that there is “no natural ownership of the language,” for him the appropriation or reappropriation of a language is possible “only to a certain point…[however] the absolute appropriation or reappropriation” of a language is never possible.

**The Language of the Other: Linguistic Human Rights**

What if unfortunately a choice were to be made and we had to save human beings rather than their idiom? (ML, 56)

Robert Phillipson reminds us that “the primary goal of all declarations of human rights…is to protect the individual against arbitrary or unjust treatment.” Although concerns about human rights go back several centuries, rights of minorities and linguistic rights in particular have been given serious consideration only recently. This section proposes a brief overview of the progress on linguistic rights and how they address education.

In the United States, the dominance of English had traditionally been taken for granted, until 1981 when Senator Hayakawa introduced a constitutional amendment to make English official. Had it been adopted, this proposal would have reversed a trend begun in the late 1960s toward accommodating the needs of linguistic minorities. Since then, several versions have been unsuccessfully submitted to Congress. Meanwhile, the organization *U.S. English* has grown, influencing policies in individual states. Crawford provides a detailed history of the “official English movement” and the complex “question of minority language rights.” While governmental restrictions on speech would obviously be inconsistent with the First and Fourteenth amendments, American law remains rather vague about linguistic rights. Furthermore, as noted earlier, all minorities are not equal: some come through immigration, some through territory annexation. The *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 and the *Voting Rights Act* of 1965 partially addressed that issue. However, although a number of relevant court decisions have been handed down since the 1970s, precedents concerning linguistic issues are scarce.

In Europe, it was after the First World War and the treaties which reshaped the continent that efforts toward codifying linguistic human rights became more systematic. The *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 1966, stipulates: “In those States in which ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right…to enjoy their own culture,…or to use their own language.” Several of these organizations and resolutions directly address education, and prescribe the following: teaching “regional” minority languages, preschool through university (*Kuijpers Resolution*, 1987); access to education in one’s native language (*Universal Declaration on Indigenous Rights*, 1988); teaching both native languages and the official language...
UNESCO recommended that the UN “adopt and implement a universal declaration of linguistic human rights,” notwithstanding the difficulty of agreeing on the definition of such rights, or on the scope of the declaration. Surely, setting a “normative, inalienable standard” would be a major step toward helping minorities legitimate their native languages, and helping them do so through education.

**MONOLINGUAL SOLIPSISM**

From the viewpoint of the person who speaks or writes the said language, this experience of monolingual solipsism is never one of belonging, of ownership, of power to control, of pure “ipseity” (ML, 44).

Several studies report on individuals who describe personal experiences with and in a language specific to each one of them. They do so in terms which go beyond the uniqueness of those experiences, in a language which is “the same.” Yet while speaking one same language, they all speak different languages within the same one.

“We never speak but one language” (ML, 21).

These testimonies are expressed in what Derrida described as “a language whose generality takes on a value which is somehow structural, universal, transcendental, or ontological” (ML, 40). They bear witness in a language they are able to speak and write “in a certain manner and up to a certain point” (ML, 42) and which they present, in the same other language, as the language of the other. At one point, this language was imposed on them, it was the only language made available to them.

We are talking here about the dominant idiom, that of the colonizer, of the “oppressor.” However, Derrida stresses that all languages are imposed on us, including our native tongue. In that respect, Derrida notes the “essential coloniality” of “culture” (colonus, colere):

Imagine, picture someone who would cultivate French.

What is called French.

And whom French would cultivate.

And who, being a French citizen in addition, would therefore be a subject, as we say, of French culture.

Now one day this subject of French culture would come to tell you, for instance, in perfectly good French:

“I have only one language, and it is not mine….”

“I am monolingual. My monolingualism endures, and I call it my abode, and I feel it as such, I remain there and I inhabit it. It inhabits me. The monolingualism in which I breath….I cannot object to it but by testifying to its omnipresence in me. It will always have preceded me. It is me. (ML, 13-14)

Our native tongue, our own language we cannot own, assimilate, appropriate: “My language, the only one I hear myself speak and which I know how to speak, is the language of the other” (ML, 47) always coming from, given by, imposed by the other.
Promotion of monolingualism supported by “linguistic and cultural genocide” is nothing new. Phillipson recalls that in fact “monolingualism has a long pedigree,” and presents an overview of “linguicidal policies” from the Greeks to present ideologies through colonialism. The dominance of one language implies the exclusion and gradual disappearance of the others, generally under a rhetoric of homogeneity presented as beneficial (as, for example, in the case of U.S. English).

“WE NEVER SPEAK ONE LANGUAGE ONLY” (ML, 21)

“Absolute monolingualism” could be possible only if a language were a unified entity, closed upon itself, with well-defined and impervious borders. It has been tried. For example, in Italy, France, and Spain academies have attempted to police the language. In the American colonies, a first proposal for standardization took shape in the late 1770s. In 1780, John Adams proposed an American Language Academy, and in 1789 Noah Webster expressed the need for a linguistic standard. However, history has proved that strict codification of a language does not work because it implies that a language exists in the absolute and in isolation. It ignores the element of accident in a language, and sets limits to expression, whereas the possibility of invention is vital to any language; indeed, it makes all the difference between langues mortes (Greek, Latin) and langues vivantes (modern languages).

Derrida quotes Khatibi “who holds against his ear the voluble conch of a double language” (ML, 64) and who wrote: “If there is not… the language, if there is no absolute monolingualism, the remaining task is to circumscribe what a maternal language is in its active division, and what is grafted between this language and the one said to be foreign.” A language is per force multiple. Furthermore, oral languages are the most creative, their borders the least rigid. In discussing languages, Derrida wants to “suspend” linguistic conventions requiring distinctions between language, idiom, and dialect. In those, he sees only external criteria, “quantitative” (how old) or “politico-symbolical” (legitimacy). He is aware of no internal and structural traits to rigorously distinguish between [them] (ML, 23). He wants to treat them equally, for what is most interesting is precisely what takes place on their borders. It is those “phenomena” which blur the frontiers, and which, by “crossing them…bring to light their historical artificiality, their violence also, that is to say the balance of forces which are concentrated there and which in truth are capitalized in them forever” (ML, 23).

The “monolingualism of the other” is first and foremost “a Law,” that of the colonial structure inherent to any culture. It is what attempts to reduce all languages to a unique expression, to the language, “that is to say to the hegemony of the homogenous” (ML, 69).

The “monolingualism of the other” also means that “no matter what, we speak only one language—and we do not have it” (ML, 70). From birth already, anyone can say “I have one language only and yet it is not mine” (ML, 42), for received from the other, even our native language is always someone else’s, always comes from someone else. In that sense, “the possessive adjective is an imposture,” all the more blatant where colonial languages are concerned. For in cases of linguistic oppression or coercion, the “master does not possess, does not own…as if naturally what he
nevertheless calls his language.” “The master is nothing” (ML, 45) if not his own phantasm, all the more terrifying, of hegemony. Yet it is totally impossible for him, “no matter what he wants or does,…to entertain a relation of natural, national, congenital, ontological ownership or identity with [language]” (ML, 45). He can account for “[this] appropriation only through a process of non-natural politico-phantasmagoric constructions” (ML, 45). Only through what Derrida calls a “rape [by] cultural usurpation,…always of colonial essence,” can he “historically…feign to appropriate it in order to impose it as ‘his own’” (ML, 45). His phantasm is that he believes he can coerce individuals, whole populations, into sharing in this belief.

However, this lack of ownership is “neither a lack nor an alienation” (ML, 47). For Derrida, this alienation is inherent to language, “constitutive” of language. “This structure of alienation without alienation, this inalienable alienation…structures [both] what is specific, proper to language, and [also] its propriety and property” (ML, 48). In Le monolinguisme de l’autre, Derrida describes his personal experience with alienation and languages in a WWII Algiers where “political and historical terror” (ML, 48) had become a reality for the child he was, and for all French Jews in Algeria.

Linguistic imperialism, may not operate through colonial conquest per se any longer, but nevertheless continues its hegemonic control the world over through numerous other venues, more or less overt or covert, including religious missions, philanthropic enterprises, market takeovers, military or genocide expeditions, and especially schools and educational institutions.

EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS AND PLURAL EDUCATION

First and foremost the master…took the figure of the schoolmaster (ML, 73).

Hooks points out how “recent discussions of diversity and multiculturalism tend to downplay or ignore the question of language.” Yet the role languages play in any society deserves the most serious attention on the part of all educators. In cases where educational opportunities are diminished or denied through linguistic control or coercion, some children find themselves excluded from the learning process, and later as members of the community they may lose all ability to participate in the governing and decisions which affect their lives.

Derrida identifies two “interdicts” placed on languages by schools. Both are first and foremost a “school thing, something which happens ‘at school,’ but barely a measure or a decision, rather a pedagogical structure. The interdict [is] coming from an ‘educational system’” (ML, 65-66). He insists on using the substantive l’interdit to stress its “exceptional and fundamental” character.

The first interdict places an interdiction on the native language to which access is restricted or denied; at school especially, children are not allowed to speak it and may be severely punished. When this occurs, says Derrida, the object of the interdiction is “not a thing, not a gesture, not an action.” What is interdicted is “access to the saying, that’s all, a certain saying” (ML, 58). But the “that’s all” does not point to a minor event. It underscores a “fundamental interdict,” an “absolute interdict”: the silencing, the obliteration of a voice, “the interdiction of the diction,
of the saying.” Derrida gives as an example the Algiers high school he attended. Though it had never been couched in terms of law, students were allowed to choose, they “had the formal right to learn, or not to learn Arab or Berbère…or Hebrew. It was not illegal, nor a crime” (ML, 59). Yet the interdiction was there, of a different kind, functioning along different paths, “more cunning, peaceable, silent, liberal,” (ML, 59) but there, and an aberration: in its home country, Arab could be learned, but as a foreign language; as for Hebrew, Derrida does not recall anyone ever taking it at school. In the US, the same aberration is lived by many minorities when they are denied growing up in their respective native languages (Spanish, Navarro), only to have to (re)learn it later, but “as the language of the other.”

The second interdict forbids the use of any language but the one setting the interdiction. It is also carried out in the schools. The imposed language is supposed to be substituted for the home language. However, “its sources, its norms, its rules, its law,” (ML, 72) its history, are situated elsewhere, anywhere but at home. For example, for children in Algiers it was located in France, the Métropole. For Derrida and his peers, it was “a distant country…not foreign,…but strange, fantastic, phantasmagoric… a dream country, at a non-objectivable distance” (ML, 73). It offered the model of a well-spoken, well-written language through the schoolmaster, who represented the language of the master, and symbolized the master himself. From this distant country “came the paradigms of distinction, correction, elegance, and of the literary or oratory language” (ML, 73).

For Derrida the “metropolis” was beyond the sea. In other instances of linguistic and cultural hegemony, this distance may be no more than that between country and metropolitan area, reservation and “White man’s world,” inner city and suburbs, between home and the school where the child is bused. In every case, it is between the reality of the context in which the dominated group lives, and the place of hegemonic power. In every case, between the standards of a “correct” language imposed by the school, and the (interdicted) spoken native tongue, whether there is a sea, an ocean or not, there is a space of “symbolic infinite dimension, a gorge for all the schoolchildren…an abyss” (ML, 75). Curricula take the form of some “doctrine of indoctrination” whereas the content taught as well as the teaching approach are literally foreign to students. The discipline where it is the most obvious is history; next is literature. These curricula offer students “the experience of a world without any sensible continuity with the one in which they actually live, almost without anything in common with [their] natural or social landscapes” (ML, 76). This kind of teaching pays little attention to the practical needs of minority children and almost none to their cultural needs. Derrida describes his experience:

So you can perceive the origin of my suffering, since this language goes right through them through and through, the site of my passions, of my desires, of my prayers, the vocation of my hopes….I wonder whether one can love, enjoy, pray, die of pain, or die period, all in another language (ML, 14).

Derrida stresses that serious as this discontinuity may be, it has some further consequences. While it shows the gap between literary and non-literary cultures, “besides this universal hierarchy” (ML, 77), it emphasizes the sharpest rift between
the dominant literature (‘its history, works, models, death rites, modes of transmission and celebration, its ‘beautiful neighborhoods,’ the names of its authors and publishers,” ML, 77) and the indigenous culture unique to the minority. In this process, the decisive agent is the school and particularly the teacher who plays the main part in promoting the dominant language and culture and in facilitating the assimilation of the linguistically and socially diverse children to the dominant norms. The consequences of these interdicts have a devastating impact on the cultures and languages of minorities:

Navajo children are taught in a foreign language: they are taught concepts which are foreign, they are taught values which are foreign, they are taught lifestyles which are foreign, and they are taught by human models which are foreign. The intention behind this kind of schooling is to mold the Navajo child (through speech, action, thought) to be like members of the predominant Anglo-Saxon mainstream culture. The apparent assumption seemingly being that people of other ethnic groups cannot be human unless they speak English, and behave according to the values of a capitalistic society based on competition and achievement. The children grow up in these schools with a sense of: confusion regarding the values, attitudes, and behavior taught at home; loss of self identity and pride concerning their selfhood — their own Navajo-ness; failure in classroom learning activities; loss of their own Navajo language … and loss of in-depth knowledge of their own Navajo culture.¹⁹

Some measures have been proposed to minimize the damaging impact of imposing languages through education. For example, the Universal Declaration on Indigenous Rights establishes some fundamental rights, some of which specifically address education, like the two following “entitlements”: the right to develop and promote native languages, including literary language, and to use them for administrative, cultural, judicial, educational and other purposes; the right to all forms of education, including the right of children to education in their native languages, and right for minorities to establish, structure, conduct, and control their own educational systems and institutions.

In his dialogue with Derrida, Edouard Glissant declared: “Each and every language must be protected against erasure as well as against fossilization.”²⁰ For him, all languages are unified in one exigency: “Attitudes must change, one must break away from this inescapable movement of annihilation of idioms, by recognizing for all languages, powerful or not, the space and means to survive in a global concert.” Glissant believes that claims of one “correct,” “best” language standard affect the very concept of language, as well as the theoretical framework of the various disciplines associated with languages. “What is questionable is the very principle, if not the reality” of the intangible unicity of a language.

Multiplicity has permeated vehicular languages and is now internal to them even as they seem to resist changes. To varying degrees of complexity, there are now several English, Spanish, or French languages. For Glissant, this multiplicity means on the one hand “[implicitly] renouncing the conceited aloofness of monolingualism,” and on the other yielding to “the temptation to participate in the global entanglement.” Not without consequences though. Glissant sees three: old oral, vernacular languages must be transcribed; techniques of language learning or translation must take into account this internal multiplicity of languages; the “opacity” of each language, vehicular or vernacular, is greatly increased. Then it becomes an anachronism to teach the language (standard English, French, Spanish). Glissant insists:
“One must preserve opacity, create a hunger for the propitious obscurities of transference, and relentlessly deny the false commodities of the vehicular sabirs.”

Whereas the United States, holding on to a monolingual view of the world and a subtractive view of bilingualism, advocate a monolinguisitc educational policy, many countries have experienced and recognized the value of plurality and plural education. They have realized that variety does not threaten a language but enriches it, and it is entirely possible to teach one’s own language, history, literature and culture, plus those of neighboring nations. Several countries in Europe manage this quite well.

**CONCLUSION**

Before closing, it must be emphasized that research in education must forego the limited and limiting concept of language as simply a “tool” and separate from human experience, in *all* disciplines. Language is constitutive of reality, experience, and identity. Teaching which ignores the cultural, sociological, and philosophical dimensions of learning works more toward assimilating learners than empowering them. Some serious work is needed on the ideological and philosophical dimensions of language and power, in education and in society in general.

10. Ibid., 171.

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18. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 173.
