The Nitobe Process in the Asian Context

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The Nitobe process arose out of an effort, going back to the 1960s and reinforced by the growth of sociolinguistics and language policy studies, to reconcile the urgent need for effective means of international communication with the desirability of maintaining linguistic diversity. There had been plenty of planning downwards – from the major languages to the equitable application of lesser-used languages – but very little planning upwards – from equitable modes of linguistic communication to a definition of the role of the major languages in that context. The first Nitobe symposium took place in 1996 in Prague and was followed by symposia in Berlin (1998), Beijing (2004), and Vilnius (2005). Much of the focus was on language policy in Europe, particularly the European Union. The present symposium, however, addresses the question of policy on the international use of languages in Asia, a subject barely touched upon by politicians and relatively little studied by linguists.

The first Nitobe Symposium took place in Prague in July 1996. Seventy-five years before, in 1921, Nitobe Inazo, under-secretary-general of the League of Nations, had attended the 13th World Congress of Esperanto in that city. He returned to his office in Geneva enthusiastic about what he had seen: a conference with representatives from around the world speaking the international language Esperanto. Upon his return he presented a report to the League of Nations in which he commented favorably on Esperanto, suggesting that it encouraged interest in other languages and cultures and could also form a valuable introduction to language study. He suggested that

Esperanto was becoming "an engine of international democracy" and that it was something that merited the League's support.

The outcome of his efforts is well known. Apart from a few token gestures on behalf of Esperanto, the League essentially rejected Nitobe's advice, driven above all by the resistance of France, which made much of the identification of language with culture, and particularly with the cultures of Europe. We can draw many different conclusions from this history. Perhaps the fight was between the major languages of the time, on the one hand, and the upstart "artificial" language of Esperanto on the other; perhaps French resistance was the inevitable outcome of its already weakened linguistic position in relation to English: English was one of two languages chosen for the deliberations at Versailles in 1919 (the other being French), and English and French were the two languages chosen for the newly founded League of Nations. It was bad enough that the French language had to share the stage with English; why should they now have to deal with Esperanto?

Or perhaps we should see the dispute as an argument about the nature and role of language and the state. The French language was, and is, seen by many as the conveyor of French culture, as a unique blend of Enlightenment thought, rationalism, the rule of law, and civic institutions. French is a national language – and nationhood and language are intimately connected. Esperanto, on the other hand, is the language of no one, existing outside the conventional political and social structures. In other words, the dispute was between a notion of language rooted in nationalism (and hence in the institutions of the nation-state) and a notion of language essentially globalized, since, regardless of how we may feel about the particular linguistic roots of Esperanto, the language was clearly conceived as a means of communication across the divisions created by a world of nation states. The intellectual ferment in which Esperanto was born – the late

nineteenth century – was a time when ideas of universalism, of moving beyond the compartmentalization of nations, were, for a moment, seriously entertained. With World War I, the so-called Great War, nationalism won out and the modern nation-state became the currency of transnational relations, essentially filtering all human intercourse through the prism of national institutions and nationalism.

The coming of sociolinguistics following World War II and the increasing attention to language as a means of communication as opposed to a conveyor of elite culture opened up what was essentially a subversive element. National politics continued as they had always continued – with a partial thaw following the war, during which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was put in place (that term "universal" harks back to a much earlier era when it was the adjective of choice for the mobilization of transnationalism), but then the great freeze of the Cold War, in which two conflicting national and imperialist ideologies battled it out. The outcome of that process was the victory of one party and the defeat of the other, but no significant move on the part of the victors to go beyond nationalism to universalism, beyond ideology to globalism.

Linguistics, on the other hand, was no longer wedded to elite notions of linguistic integrity and thus offered the possibility of addressing the politics of nationalism from a new vantage-point. The meeting in Prague in 1996 was a small effort with a very expansive goal: to ask the question, in a post-imperial moment in the newly freed Czech Republic, whether it was now time to think about linguistic communication in some context other than that of the superiority of some *national* languages over others. Was there a way of analyzing language difference and the need for effective transnational communication, that could use modes of thought other than those of nationalism? Were there ways of modeling international linguistic relations that could balance economic efficiencies and distributive

justice, and that could allow for differing and multiple views of personal identity? By 1996, there were forty years of mainstream experience in language planning to draw on – language planning in which the conflicting demands of multiple languages and multiple ethnic identities had been addressed in newly independent countries, and in which, even in the most monolithic of nation-states, more and more attention was given to the claims of minority languages and peoples, and diversity was valued in a world that seemed to be growing homogeneous. Increasingly, the question of language rights was coming to the fore (led by such figures as Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas), and increasingly the relationship between language and power was being defined and interrogated (above all by Pierre Bourdieu).

Taking its lead from Nitobe's report of 1921, the first of the Nitobe Symposia was entitled "Towards Linguistic Democracy." In the formulation of Mark Fettes, "Any system of communication which confers lifelong privileges on some while requiring others to devote years of effort to achieving a lesser degree of competence is fundamentally antidemocratic." How could choice of language be balanced best with the increasing need for broader communication? Could our starting-point in confronting that question be "language" as opposed to "languages" – that is to say, the human ability to make and use language rather than the human ability to adopt a single language already well established, with its accompanying institutional power? In the years since 1996 we have witnessed increasing attention to variants of that question. Grin, Vaillancourt, Pool and others have proposed ways of thinking about linguistic diversity that are based on political economics – balancing maximum efficiency against maximum choice. Kymlicka, May, Van Parijs and others have asked questions about maximizing linguistic justice. And this debate has continued in the context of globalization, which both threatens diversity and puts ever greater strains on a global communication system based on the

linguistic materials of nationalism.

While a great deal of attention has been given to looking *downwards* from the most powerful languages to the weakest, until recently little attention has been given to looking *upwards* from alternatives for transnational communication to the ongoing conflict of powerful languages. The Nitobe process is, above all, a response to that imbalance. In the 1990s, Pool and Fettes drew up a set of options for resolving competing linguistic claims that they called interlingualism. Their interest was not only resolving linguistic conflicts *downwards* (How do you define the role of lesser-used languages in a world in which major international languages dominate?) but also resolving them *upwards* (Are there lesser-used solutions to language inequity at the international level other than the unfettered domination and resulting inequities of the major international languages?). What are the options available, for example, to international organizations where communication across language barriers is essential? Both Pool and Fettes had thought hard and long about alternatives to the language regime at the United Nations, for example – both through their association with the Esperantic Studies Foundation, created in the 1960s, and through the Center for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems, whose journal, *Language Problems and Language Planning* was founded also in the 1960s, and which sponsored a series of conferences in the 1980s and 1990s with the language services at the United Nations.

The ongoing expansion of the European Union raised, particularly in the 1990s and now in the current decade, the question of *planning upwards* with a new urgency. The Nitobe process has accordingly been associated most particularly with the European language situation, where the expansion of the European Union is introducing more and more languages at the national level and increasing the pressure to find equitable ways of communicating across member-states. But the

perennial question of the United Nations also remains on the agenda. A second symposium was held in Berlin in 1999 and a third in Beijing in 2004. The fourth symposium followed in Vilnius in 2005. Its focus was very specifically Europe: "What arrangements should be made for the use of languages in the various EU bodies ... and what policies should be introduced" in the various member-states? The thrust of the argument was that a failure to establish formal policy was in itself a kind of policy, simply leaving in place the untrammeled influence of the powerful languages (particularly English) at the expense of the less powerful. A follow-up conference on language policy and language rights in the EU took place in Bratislava in November 2006 in which the focus was on the international language policies of the so-called Visegrad countries (Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary), all of them new members of the European Union. As the Deputy Prime Minister of Slovakia, Dušan Čaplocič, explained, it is mainly the Visegrad countries and the Baltic states "which point out that giving priority to French and German ... is neither democratic nor in accordance with the declared idea of equality of languages. The hegemony of English is not acceptable to many countries either."

In addressing the language situation in Asia, the present symposium moves in a somewhat different direction and deals with a sharply different situation. It would be tempting and simplistic to suggest that the language situation in Asia is a legacy of European imperialism – but of course the same is manifestly true of Europe as well: the situation of English in the UK and Ireland is clearly a legacy of internal colonialism, as is the situation of French in France; and the geolinguistics of Central and Eastern Europe are an outcome of the imperial history of those regions. But Asia lacks the tight political structures of Europe, and carries with it much richer cultural and linguistic diversity. In this context, European languages, and especially English, have played a double role – as instruments of imperial expansion (and now as facilitators of the global economy), and also

as appropriated means of resistance to the west or as instruments of national unity. In the past half-century, English has assumed a largely uncontested role as a lingua franca – owned by no one and hence in some sense neutral (or, alternatively, one among a number of Asian languages). But the question remains as to whether the appearance of neutrality is no more than an appearance, and whether unity through English threatens cultural diversity. This question and others like it have barely been examined in the past. But the question of what language policy should be pursued by the peoples of Asia has great significance. What languages must be taught in schools? What linguistic principles should govern inter-state relations; in other words, how can we plan *upwards* (from the vantage-point of the less internationalized and non-European languages) as well as downwards? Is there an international role for the major languages of the region, like Chinese, Japanese, Hindi, or Indonesian? And what lessons can be learned from the past? It is time for scholars and politicians to turn their attention to the international role of language in Asia. Perhaps the lessons to be learned can be applied to other parts of the world as well.

As we begin our deliberations, let us bear in mind the nine questions formulated in the call to the meeting:

1. How have European languages influenced, and how do they continue to influence, communication in Asia? What aspects of life are most dependent on them; what aspects make most use of Asian languages?
2. What are the consequences for Asians and Asian societies of the present language system, in which European and Asian languages divide between them various functions (communication, culture, identity, policy)?
3. Do European languages contribute only to globalization, or also to development of national and regional identities? How do they influence cultural development?

4. Who are the owners of these European languages? To what extent have the peoples of Asia made these languages their own?
5. Can one point to an increase in the international (regional or worldwide) significance of any Asian languages?
6. What is the future of the English language in Asia? What role does it play in the various individual countries? What factors will influence its further expansion and integration?
7. What other European languages have a significant role in Asia?
8. What principles should guide realistic national or international language policy in Asia?
9. What place should European and Asian languages occupy in the education system?

If we are able to identify just a few answers to some of these questions, and if we are able to refine the questions themselves, the Nitobe process will begin also in the Asian context, leading perhaps to further study and to specific action to put language on the Asian agenda.

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