

MONOLINGUISMO/MONOPOLISMO: LANGUAGE, EMPIRE, AND THE
POST 9/11 IMPERIAL PANIC

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Three days before he died, Teddy Roosevelt, the architect of American imperialism, wrote a letter to the American Defense Society in which he made his now famous declaration about language, loyalty and immigration: "We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language. And we have room for but one sole loyalty, and that is a loyalty to the American people." It was January of 1919. One hundred and thirty years earlier, the US constitution had been published simultaneously in 3 languages (French, Spanish and English). Its authors had decided not to establish English as the official language of the new republic, fearing an infringement on individual liberty. While the linguistic freedom of subject populations including African slaves and indigenous people was not of concern, other communities had been free to choose in what language they wished to conduct their business, including education. In the wake of World War I, the US's first imperial president reversed all that. "Every immigrant who comes here should be required within five years to learn English or to leave the country," he said in a statement to the *Kansas City Star* in 1918. "English should be the only language taught or used in the public schools."

Proponents of assimilation today evoke his words often – the doctrine has not shifted. “We should insist,” Roosevelt went on,

that if the immigrant who comes here in good faith becomes an American and assimilates himself to us, he shall be treated on an exact equality with everyone else, for it is an outrage to discriminate against any such man because of creed, or birthplace, or origin. But this is predicated upon the man's becoming in very fact an American, and nothing but an American. There can be no divided allegiance here. Any man who says he is an American, but something else also, isn't an American at all. We have room for but one flag, the American flag” ...

It's a remarkably strong statement. Monolingualism in English is coded here as the essential outward sign of loyalty; bi- or multi-lingualism becomes the outward sign of divided loyalty, which, to paraphrase Roosevelt, is no loyalty at all. And this monolingual loyalty is the precondition of the right to equality. In its absence, discrimination ceases to be an outrage.

It might seem paradoxical for an imperial president to take a stand for monolingualism – after all if you aspire to global dominance, mastery of others' languages should seem a powerful if not essential tool. And no loyalty is more valuable to you than that of the bilingual people who do mediate your relationships with friends and foe – like the 7,000 interpreters in Iraq who find themselves stranded and abandoned by their American employers there. But the history of expansionist states shows that such states often try to homogenize themselves internally as they begin to expand imperially, and language is one of the most obvious instruments of

homogenization. The example of Nebrija in Spain is a well known to Hispanistas. The Académie Française was founded in 1639, as France's colonization of North America began. France's first colonial settlement (1605) and its first universal grammar (1660) bear the same name: Port Royal. In the US, hostility to languages other than English, especially German, began heating up in the 1890s along with US aspirations for dominance in the hemisphere.

Nevertheless, the US does seem to be exceptional: probably no other imperial power has been as actively hostile to translinguistic and transcultural knowledge. An active refusal to engage with, or even recognize the realities of geolinguistic and geocultural diversity has been a hallmark of American empire. We witness this indifference domestically, in the amazing absence of public investment in foreign language learning, and in the constant suspicion towards area studies, despite their cold war origins. The indifference to difference is asserted globally by US embassies notoriously filled with personnel, from the ambassadors to CIA station chiefs, who don't know the language of the place and have no way of reflecting on what it means not to know the language. The US foreign service system is specifically weighted against serious connection with the language and place of one's posting. American personnel are required to rotate every few years, preferably to different geopolitical regions. Such uprooting is aimed to prevent compromising local relationships from developing, and it probably does. The fear of Roosevelt's divided loyalties trumps the benefits of expertise and the ability to communicate. Tim Weiner's recently published

history of the CIA in case after case documents the enormous costs of this mindset, often in the words of former CIA officials themselves.¹

English monolingualism operates in the US not as a policy but as a dogma, that is, as a commitment that is impervious to reality. The attitude is best summed up by the apocryphal Texan who is supposed to have said: “If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it’s good enough for me.” The line survives because it captures vividly the dogmatic character of the US demand for monolingualism and its detachment from reality and history.² I call it the language blindspot. True stories abound. When the Republicans took over Congress in 1996 their leader, Newt Gingrich, called bilingualism “a menace to American civilization” and sponsored an English Language Empowerment Bill that, among other things, prohibited federal employees from using any language other than English for government business. Astonishingly, the bill passed in the House, though greater sanity prevailed in the Senate. But consider the fact that such a bill could have been proposed in the first place, actively prohibiting the whole state apparatus of the world’s lone superpower from communicating with anyone else in their own language. It’s a performance of pure ideology emanating from an imperial imaginary, but as an imperial act it’s sheer madness -- not an act of muscular assertiveness, but a huge abdication of power. Meanwhile, between 1984 and 2000, broadened immigration policies made the US more linguistically diverse than it had ever been in its history. During the same period twenty one states passed laws or constitutional amendments making

¹ Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: A History of the CIA*, 2007

² Note that in reference to the Koran, the statement works fine: if Arabic was good enough for Mohammed it’s good enough for me. Here lie several revealing contrasts between Christianity and Islam and their sacred texts.

English their official language. Newt appended to his English only proposal a fervent rejection of government sponsored English classes for immigrants, dismissed as “linguistic welfare.” We’re only gonna do business in English but we’re damned if we’re gonna help anybody learn it.

The equation of loyalty with an imagined monolingualism and monoculturalism is a hallmark of American nationalism, and the perceived threat of translingual and transcultural knowledge is a hallmark of American imperialism. This is not at all to say that all or even most Americans subscribe to these dogma. But they are normative ideologies and fundamental ingredients of the Washington Consensus. They make possible the pursuit of one-size-fits-all programs, whether cold war style coups d’etat or neoliberal style economic privatizations and multiparty elections -- empire by recipe as if a single set of ingredients were present in the same way at any point on the planet and combined would produce the same dish. Or better, empire by playbook, as if the geopolitical order were teams in a league. While it tends to imagine itself this way, American empire doesn’t succeed in functioning this way – indeed, after reading 60 years of declassified documents, Weiner narrates the CIA’s history as a trail of inept failures, often caused by willful ignorance. In order for the playbook to stay the same, you have to make sure you continue, to echo Rumsfeld’s formulation, to not know what you don’t know. Multilingualism threatens this mindset; monolingualism is one of its linchpins.

US imperialism, whether the Cold War variety, the Washington Consensus variety, or the war on terror variety, has *chosen to be* simpleminded like this. After the first attack on the World Trade Center in

1993, the FBI discovered it had in its possession videotapes, manuals and notebooks on bomb making that predicted the attack. They had been seized from Ahmad Ajaj, a Palestinian serving time in federal prison for passport fraud, but never translated. Did anyone address the language gap? No. In fact a year later a school superintendent in Dearborn, Michigan, superintendent Jeremy Hughes got a \$5 million government grant to form a two-way Arabic-English program at a high school in his district where 90% of the students are native speakers of Arabic. The proposal was rejected by the local board of education and opened the way for a wholesale public attack on bilingual education, directed at the city's Arab population. "This is America. Public money for public education should be used for English only," said one spokesman.³ And so the scenario repeated with the second WTC attack – materials full of cues were found untranslated in FBI hands.

The domestic subject interpellated by US imperialism, then, the patriot of the Patriot Act, the homelander offered Homeland Security in exchange for privacy, is a subject that is called upon to will its own ignorance, to actively seek not to know. Dogmatic monolingualism, I am arguing, is a prime public standardbearer of an imperial will to ignorance. The interpellation often works – the education system produced many Americans who are like this. But of course it often does not always work at all – that is, many Americans are NOT like this, and couldn't be if they tried. Dogma aside, the US remains relentlessly multilingual because imported labour has been a central ingredient of its strategy for economic expansion, from slavery on down. Imported labour creates linguistic realities on the

³ Margot Hornblower, "Putting Tongues in Check" SIRS Researcher, Winter 1997, pp.4-5

ground that simply can't be made to go away: When people migrate, their languages go with them and nobody has any choice about that fact.

Language is not among the things that can be left behind. Nor can languages be forgotten, or traded in the way, say, modes of dress or even religions can. You can't stop knowing a language by an act of will, nor can you acquire another language by an act of will. Both take a long time and only happen under very specific circumstances. Some adults, especially old people, can't learn new languages at all, and all the language requirements in the world won't change that, just as legislation won't prevent language loss if the motivation and conditions for transmission between generations are broken.⁴

Inevitably then, from the time Roosevelt made his speech in 1919, his prescriptions met with continuous opposition, mainly among patriotic, non-English-speaking and bilingual Americans. The first challenges to English Only laws came in the 1920s from German speaking communities in Texas who sued for the right to educate their children in German. They won the legal battle, even as public opinion swung against them. In the 1930s psychologists began warning parents that bilingualism caused permanent psychological damage in children, while the residential school system undertook to eradicate indigenous societies most specifically through linguistic terrorism. In the late 1960s Chinese speaking parents took up the cause after civil rights legislation passed guaranteeing all children the right to an equal education. The list of legal battles goes on from there.

⁴ With respect to language alone, the 2000 census recorded that ten per cent of the population of the US lived in homes where languages other than English were spoken, and another 10% came from such homes. At the same time, just over 20% of American citizens have a passport – though this is changing now with the new requirements for travel to Canada and the Caribbean.

Meanwhile, in everyday life, the lived reality of multilingualism is everywhere. Spanish is the de facto second language of the country. Customer service is bi- and multi-lingual; there is a boom in translation and interpretation careers and a dire lack of facilities for training in these areas; radio and television pour across the airwaves in every language under the sun; mixed-language radio is a new expressive form; the demand for language teachers cannot be met anywhere in the country. State and local court systems are overwhelmed by the need for trained interpreters in dozens of languages, and cases all over the country are bogged down for months by the lack of such people. So far, despite Roosevelt's threats, legal rights have not been entirely trumped by the English only dogma.

Other priorities, however, do get trumped. The will to ignorance executes itself in repressive language policies that fly in the face of the demands of the national interest, even when it is defined in narrow security terms. What happened with Arabic in Michigan is happening with dozens of languages in the U. S., including every language the Pentagon identifies as "strategic" or "critical." A large proportion of the children entering kindergarten in Beverley Hills are native speakers of Farsi, the offspring of a passionately moderate, affluent, pro-American Iranian community there. The education system is actively prohibited from investing in the linguistic abilities of those children, even though just up Highway 101 at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, adult military recruits struggle to master basic Farsi. The Pashtun speaking Afghani community of Hayward, California has produced a world class novelist, Khaled Hosseini, author of the *Kite Runner*, but the education system is cued to eradicate Pashtun in the young, rather than designating Hayward as the place to cultivate the corps of

bilingual Pashtun-English speakers so desperately needed to develop US-Afghanistan relations. The same is happening in language communities all over the country, even as courts are paralyzed by lack of interpreters, and businesses search for employees with language skills.⁵ In the post-consensus era of the war on terror, U.S. educational policies remain dedicated to the eradication of languages other than English in the young. The insecurity-driven fear of divided loyalties domestically trumps the insecurity-driven need to know what enemies are saying and doing, and the result is insecurity, and continued “intelligence failures.”⁶

II.

Let me now qualify the picture I’ve created. There are two areas where the US’s imperial mode has called for translingual and transcultural expertise: propaganda and eavesdropping, both non-communicative, non-dialogic deployments of language competence. US military vocabulary calls the dissemination of propaganda “Psychological Operations” and propaganda specialists are “Psyops.” In the beginning of the Cold War the main instruments of Psychological Operations were radio broadcasts and leaflet drops (used for example in the invasion of Guatemala, Korea, the Hungarian uprising, the Bay of Pigs), to which loudspeaker and television broadcasts have been added. All four media remain in use in Iraq and Afghanistan today, as they were in the first Gulf War, the invasion of

⁵ One of the US’s most patriotic immigrant communicators, Cuban Miami, has maintained its Spanish language education system through a combination of defiant commitment and private affluence, proving that fervent patriotism and educated bilingualism are perfectly compatible. The CIA is only one of many American institutions that have benefitted hugely from the steady stream of recruits that system has produced.

⁶ The European Union is often cited at this point as the contrasting positive example. It should be noted, however, that while EU countries invest hugely in teaching their citizens multiple European languages, they have, until very recently, suppressed immigrant languages as aggressively as the U.S. has done—as in the case of Turkish in Germany or Arabic in France.

Panama, and so on. The army's First Loudspeaker and Leaflet Company was deployed during the Korean war; the first Psychological Operations Regiment was established in 1998, with its training facility at Fort Bragg, Georgia.

I mentioned above what's communicatively distinctive about propaganda: there's no dialogue, it's pure *interpellation*. Its modes of subjectification narrow down to two: declaration and exhortation, the incitement to action and the incitement to belief. "This is who you are (to us), and this is what we want (from you). "The ultimate objective of U.S military psychological operations," says one specialist, "is the dissemination of truthful [!sic] information to foreign audiences in support of US policy and national objectives, to convince enemy, neutral, and friendly nations and forces to take action favorable to the United States and its allies" (Rouse website, emphasis mine). Propaganda disallows the interrogative: Who are you and what do you want? This chronically impoverished, pared down repertoire seems to be one of the quintessential features of the current phase of American empire, one that guarantees chronic ineffectiveness, and often looks insane. In 2005 an Australian journalist in Afghanistan filmed an operation in which an American Psyop team set fire to two Taliban corpses while an interpreter read over a loudspeaker a statement denouncing the survivors as "cowards and lady-men" for not coming out to stop the violation of their religion's precepts. The insult failed to provoke the Taliban but the film caused an international outcry. Interpellation is the main way Bush and his puppetmasters seem to imagine their relations between the US and others, both allies and friends. We need channels of communication, Bush says over and over, so that he can "reach out to others and explain why I

make the decisions I make.”⁷ After six years this posture has become so familiar it’s hard to see the debilitated communicative order it seeks to create.

The status and the limitations of interpellation have been dramatized technologically in the last few years by a new piece of technology developed by the DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency run by John Poindexter. It’s a device called the Phraselator. The Phraselator is a hand-held language machine about the size of a Palm Pilot that translates pre-selected sentences from English into another language. A person says the sentence in English into a built-in microphone and the machine plays a recorded version of the corresponding sentence in the target language. If the speaker needs help selecting a sentence, he or she can search the machine’s repertoire on a screen with a stylus, like a Palm Pilot. To change languages, or to install a different set of sentences, you insert a different memory card in a slot on the side of the machine. The Phraselator was first used to question Albanian refugees in Bosnia in 1997. Passing the test, it went on to help intercept ships in the Arabian Gulf in 1999, and (inevitably) to question undocumented Chinese and Spanish-speaking immigrants at the Mexican border. After 9/11 it was rushed into mass production in anticipation of war. When US troops landed in Afghanistan in October 2001, several dozen soldiers were carrying Phraselators programmed in Pashto. Thousands of Phraselators, armed with Arabic and Kurdish, have been deployed in Iraq.

⁷ ⁷The Economist 1/15/05

As a language machine, the Phraselator has one big limitation. It understands nothing. You can use it to ask a question, but when it comes to comprehending the answer, you're on your own. You can use it to give an order, but if someone wants to explain why they can't comply or why your order is a bad idea, or based on erroneous information, the machine can't help you. The Phraselator can only say the exact sentences someone has put into it beforehand. It can't adjust its messages at all in response to the situation it's in. For all these reasons, it often doesn't communicate much better than gestures. One soldier in Iraq said, "Pointing a machine gun at enemy soldiers and yelling loudly in English and motioning them to get down tends to work wonders compared with pulling out the Phraselator and having it say 'Drop your weapon.'" On the other hand, the soldier said, he used his Phraselator as a toy to amuse some children, and then had it ask them about hidden weapons. They led him to a cache of lethal grenades.ⁱ

The other translinguistic relationship the security state seeks out is eavesdropping. Many of you will recall the outcry when in January 2002 DARPA proposed a huge domestic surveillance program whose name, Total Information Awareness, states the extraordinary fantasy that gave rise to it. The project was defunded by Congress a year later, in part because of public objections, and in part because the fantasy quickly became a monster. The big limitation of eavesdropping in the electronic era, is excess of input. Each solution for handling input tends to add new possibilities for acquiring input.⁸

⁸ As of this writing, a trial of suspected terrorists at Fort Dix is held up for months because federal investigators recorded more than 200 hours of telephone conversations with the defendants, in Arabic, Albanian and English. The defense estimated it would take four linguists four months to translate the materials.

III

I'm going to shift now to yet another angle in this reflection on language, the Washington consensus, and its aftermath. I have noticed two intriguing points where key ideological constructs of language theory and free market neoliberalism seem to intersect, namely, in the ideas of *self-regulation* and *exchange*. Both seem to operate in the same way to invisibilize relations of inequality or coercion. Here is my hypothesis: that with respect to both markets and language, (a) exchange works as an ideological construct that falsely reads *equivalence as equality*, and (b) self-regulation works as an ideological construct that falsely reads *equivalence as equity*. Now let me see if I can clarify this. Free market ideology imagines markets as naturally self-regulating -- in the buying and selling of labor and commodities, relative values of things exchanged will always reach an equilibrium – X amount of Y is equivalent in worth to A amount of B, and whatever relation of equivalence results, it will be the correct one given the supply and demand. In other words, the equivalences produced by laws of supply and demand are by definition equitable. This equation of equivalence with equity is, I think, what self-regulation means. Whatever outcome the market produces is the “right” outcome. It has never been a secret that this concept of the free market does not stand up to a moment's scrutiny. It has operated, transparently and successfully, as an ideological construct to legitimate market relationships premised on inequality.

Language too is often imagined as a self-regulating market: in linguistic thought, the generative powers of language, like those of the market, are conventionally imagined as always naturally fulfilling (=supply)

the communicative needs (=demand) of its users. The study of speech communities assumes that (1) the linguistic resources people have are by definition the ones they need to do what they want or need to do in the worlds they live in, and (2) when new demands or opportunities come along that require new linguistic resources, people will automatically and freely invent those resources and the resources they invent will by definition be the ones they need. Whole new languages called pidgins get created, for instance, when groups come into contact to trade with one another. Linguists love these and have devoted an entire branch of linguistics to studying them. When the Sandinista government in Nicaragua created the country's first school for the deaf, the pupils at nobody's bidding went about creating their own sign language, giving linguists their first opportunity to watch the invention of a new language from scratch. In the towns of northern Jalisco, Andres Fabregas reports, returning migrants teach the kids basic English in preparation for their future travel north. Since human beings are all equivalent in their linguistic abilities, the thinking goes, each person will automatically acquire the language competence they need to do the things they want or need to do.

As with markets, this vision does not withstand a moment's scrutiny. Just as markets are constantly manipulated to support exploitation and exploitation, control of access to linguistic resources is constantly used to keep some people in their place and give others mobility. Indeed, this is where language and the marketplace meet. Immigrants to New York City will tell you how difficult it is to learn enough of the right kind of English to move up in the labor market, especially into managerial jobs. Bilinguals will tell you how devastating it is to develop one's deep affective relations in

a home language, only to be compelled to switch to an entirely different language on entering school. Within both immigrant and indigenous communities, gender hierarchies distribute language competencies in such a way that women remain monolingual in the local language while men have access to national languages and the political and economic power that brings. In immigration debates, people who declare, “When my grandparents came from Italy in the 1920s, they just went to school and learned English without a fuss,” may forget they are telling the story of the winners, and that there were losers. In the realm of language, then, the idea of the self-regulating market also obscures inequity, coercion and exploitation.

The ideology of exchange performs the same operation in an even simpler way: by imagining the fact of exchange as implying not just equivalence between entities, but equality between them. If both sides consent to an exchange then can by definition be imagined as symmetrical, an exchange among equals. Here is Ferdinand de Saussure’s famous depiction of linguistic communication:



A rigid symmetry idealizes difference out of the picture. This schema, I would argue, models not only linguistic relations, but the modern citizenship, as it constitutes the body politic, the market, and the speech community – a horizontal, symmetrical brotherhood of equivalent and equal entities in relations of exchange. Let me now repeat my earlier suggestion: in the case of both markets and language, (a) exchange works as an

ideological construct that falsely equates equivalence with equality, and (b) self-regulation works as an ideological construct that falsely equates equivalence with equity. The parallelism is not arbitrary, for ideologies of both language and the market predicate the same imagined citizen-subject, bleaching the same relations of power and inequalities out of the picture. For better or for worse, neither grasps the actual workings of markets or of language.

IV

I'll end with a few empirical observations about language and the Washington Consensus. For people who pay attention to language distribution, the Washington Consensus has meant (1) the expansion of what has come to be called Imperial English as the international lingua franca in everything from business to travel to anticapitalist social movements;(2) the accelerated weakening of small, local languages whose local economies and ecologies are invaded by multinationals sponsored by nation-states; (3) the strengthening of smaller local languages in places that have been able to profit from globalization, such as Catalan, Irish, Hawaiian; (4) the colonization of academic publishing by English at the expense of other European-based languages like German, Spanish, or Portuguese (5) the emergence all over the world of new hybrid languages based on combinations of English with national languages—Taglish in the Philippines, Franglish in France and French Canada, a Farsi-English mix among Iranians, Spanglish in the United States and parts of Mexico and (6) the challenge to state apparatuses of immigrant populations with a huge diversity of linguistic aptitudes and needs. Many other things have

happened linguistically, but these are the changes that have stood out to observers.

The challenges to the Washington consensus have also taken linguistic form. In order to broaden access to the Brazilian diplomatic service, Lula recently reduced the language requirements and in particular the expectation of fluency in English. In an effort to democratize access to the global economy and globalized knowledge circuits, the Chilean government legislated compulsory English instruction for all elementary school students, a pattern many countries are following. Russia and Malaysia, on the other hand, have just undertaken to strengthen their national languages. In Malaysia, higher education teachers who have taught all their lives in English have just been required to switch to Malay.⁹ Like all imperial languages, English meanwhile is unfolding in the megalopolises of the world into local varieties that are becoming mutually unintelligible, just as Latin did. The English language no longer belongs to any particular country; rather it is being seized as the global lingua franca by countries committed to creating educated citizenries. Security measures in the United States have discouraged foreign students, who are either staying home or going elsewhere to study. This self-isolating development potentially shifts the US out of its position as the center of global knowledge production. At the same time, American universities are the model for a new set of “world universities” popping up all over the planet, with classes in English designed to cater to a hugely diverse South-South student body. At the same time, within the U.S., the 9-11 security crisis has occasioned a set of new language learning initiatives. Sponsored mainly by the Department of Defense, these

⁹ Joe Lo Bianco, University of Melbourne, personal communication.

initiatives target a set of about a dozen “critical” or “strategic” languages, and linked directly to hiring pipelines in security agencies. Compared to global English, their scale is minuscule: a few thousand Americans are now studying Chinese; 300 million Chinese are learning English and achieving astonishing levels of competence (there are national competitions in English, adjudicated by panels of international judges).

If you feel a twinge of anxiety at that last statement, it is because language in the US has become a pawn in the culture of fear. On the one hand, Americans learn, their lack of language expertise makes them vulnerable – the FBI had no translators to listen to the tapes. On the other hand, people learn to experience the presence of other languages as a threat – months ago in a Seattle airport departure lounge, frightened passengers called security forces when a fellow passenger began speaking Urdu on a cell phone. He was detained and interrogated. The army’s Psychological Operations training center at Fort Bragg recently discovered that several Syrians hired as desperately needed language instructors were using fake green cards. Bilingualism is the point of vulnerability, the chink in the armor, the puncture wound where disloyalty festers.

In sum, the language deficit, as it has come to be called, is a recurring theme in the discourse of terror that has been so successful in convincing Americans to accept authoritarian measures. This is the latest mutation generated by the ideology of dogmatic monolingualism. The limitations of that ideology translate into an unstable and unpredictable disconnect among five things: 1) the reality of linguistic and ethnic diversity in the United States 2) the politics of English monolingualism 3) the planetary

reconfigurings of neoliberal globalization 4) the US's assumed role as lone global superpower and 5) the breaking up of the Washington Consensus as nation-states develop ways of refusing its interpellations. END

ⁱ The Economist, 1/4/05