

**THE GROUND FLOOR OF THE WORLD**  
**On the socio-economic consequences of linguistic globalisation<sup>1</sup>**

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One of my former research assistants married an Indian woman, another a Korean woman. One now works and lives in the United States, the other in the United Kingdom. In all likelihood, both are now stuck forever on what I shall here call the ground floor of the world. If countries located on the upper floors want them back – and, more importantly, if they want to retain hundreds of thousands of their younger siblings –, they face a cruel dilemma. Either they will have to lose their souls or they will have to lose their hearts. Either they will have to put up with the erosion of their cultures or they will have to stomach the dismantling of their solidarity systems. I shall ask at the end of this article whether there is any credible way out of this dilemma. But I shall first argue that it exists, by introducing step by step the four assumptions whose conjunction provides a strong basis for expecting it to take an increasingly acute form.

### **1. Native languages in a global regime: the territorial imperative**

Statistics of language use in the world are plagued with an unavoidable level of arbitrariness, not so much because it is difficult to decide what counts as competence in a particular language, but because it is ultimately arbitrary to decide when two ways of speaking constitute two different languages, rather

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than two variants of the same language.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it is commonly asserted that there are about 6000 living languages, out of which over 2000 have less than 1000 speakers left and are therefore in the process of dying. Out of these 6000 languages, the top ten are the first languages of over 50 percent of the world population (2550 million), the top twenty, shown below (Appendix 1), of over 65 percent (3220 Million), and the top 100 of over 90 percent.<sup>3</sup>

In a traditional agrarian era, figures about first languages evolve slowly with the rates of population increase or decrease, as newly born human beings learn the first language of their parents and (more or less) replace older speakers silenced by death. With the rise of the nation state and the colonial empires, the primacy of this slow demographic trend was more or less brutally upset. In revolutionary France, for example, the Abbé Grégoire was asked to investigate the linguistic state of the nation. He was dismayed to discover how few knew French, even though it was, he believed, "the only true language of France". He therefore recommended that one should anéantir les patois, annihilate the local idioms, and "universalise the use of the French language" (Citron 1999: 13). This was achieved, in France and elsewhere, basically through compulsory public schooling, as notoriously emphasised by Ernest Gellner (1983), and also to some extent through compulsory conscription, as documented by Roger Brubaker (1992). Thus arose a powerful mechanism of displacement of local by national languages, as the school language gradually became the language the parents would speak to their children, partly in order to better prepare them for school, partly also in response to the growing intranational mobility generated by industrialisation and urbanisation, and facilitated by the very spread of the nation's official language.

As the transnational migration of individuals and families expanded, the same tool of compulsory education in the national language, routinely coupled with a stigmatisation of the immigrants' original languages, was massively used to secure the assimilation of immigrants and their offspring, including again in the choice of the language they chose to speak to their children. Thus, the same basic process applies in one case to the assimilation of national minorities stuck within the borders of a state with an official language different from their mother tongues. In the other, it applies to the assimilation of ethnic minorities generated by immigration. In both cases, it can be aptly described, using

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<sup>2</sup> Is Macedonian, for example, a distinct language, or is it just a variety of Bulgarian? Why should Dutch (the official language of the Netherlands and Flanders), and not Shwyzdütsch (the family of native dialects spoken in the Germanic cantons of Switzerland), be regarded as a language distinct from German, when the linguistic distance from Hochdeutsch is about the same in both cases? Clearly, the fact that, at some point in history, a political authority happened to be in a position to give some dialect a distinct written form, cannot settle the linguistic question.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Wardhaugh (1987: 1), Depecker (1997: 110-111), Crystal (1997: 286-7) and the web site "Ethnologue: Languages of the World".

Gellner's (1993: 139-140) telling metaphor, as one that gradually converts the linguistic map – and tirelessly re-converts it, as new stains appear – from a Kokoshka painting into a Modigliani painting, from a motley patchwork of coloured spots to a neat juxtaposition of smooth surfaces demarcated by firm lines.

However, this Gellner-type, top-down, state-driven mechanism does not constitute the only mechanism through which weaker mother tongues get displaced by stronger ones in a post-agrarian, frequent-contact, high-mobility context. There is another, bottom-up, people-driven type of mechanism, a soft brand of Modiglianisation as it were, which has been well described by Jean Laponce (1984, 1993a, 1983b) and will prove crucial to my argument. The core of the mechanism can be compactly expressed as follows: « The nicer people are with one another, the nastier languages are with each other ». Languages can coexist for centuries when there is little or no contact – think of Yiddish in Eastern Europe, for example, or of Aramean in Turkey (Barnett 1968), or of the many native languages of North America. But as soon as people start talking, trading, working with each other, indeed making love and having children together, one of the two languages will be slowly but inexorably driven out by the other, by the one which people have a stronger incentive to learn because of its being more prestigious or more widely spread.<sup>4</sup>

Even in the absence of any top-down assimilation, the move from Kokoshka to Modigliani therefore tends to proceed at a pace that can be expected to be the faster, the greater the intensity of trans-community interaction and the status inequality between the languages concerned. Often the two mechanisms reinforce each other. But sometimes the Laponce-type mechanism is observable in a fairly pure form – and is then usually the object of sharply contrasting perceptions, depending on which linguistic community one belongs to –, for example in Quebec until 1975, in Flanders between 1898 and 1932, or in Brussels throughout the twentieth century. For in these areas and periods, officially affirmed bilingualism is supposed to have switched off the Gellner-type mechanism as regards the two recognised languages, while the dominant language (English in Canada, French in Belgium) keeps spreading at the expense of the weaker one through differential conversion rates of both native and immigrant families. Because language is a means of communication, there is an intrinsic vulnerability of the weaker language, which does not plague in the same way other components of culture, such as religious practices or cooking habits.

To protect vulnerable languages, there is, under circumstances of high mobility, at best one effective strategy, the firm application of the linguistic

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the statistics on the language prevailing in mixed (French/English) couples in Canada (Laponce 1993b: 34-35).

territoriality principle: *Cuius regio, eius lingua*. What this principle amounts to is the imposition of the weaker language as the public language of a particular territory, that is, essentially as the only admissible language in that territory as regards public administration, political life, judiciary procedures and above all publicly funded compulsory education. This strategy has tended to be closely associated with the formation of new sovereign states (from Norway to the Ukraine), but it has also been present from the start in a highly decentralised plurilingual confederation such as Switzerland (Papaux 1997) and has been introduced, under strong pressure from the dominated linguistic community, in a number of other plurilingual states such as Belgium in 1932 (with a number of explosive exceptions) and Canada in 1975 (with Quebec's notorious "Law 101"). In a world of contact and movement, there is no other means of durably protecting vulnerable languages (and therefore, arguably, no other means of sustainably securing linguistic peace) than the firm assertion of the territoriality principle : when people intend settling in a particular territory, they should kindly but firmly be asked to have the humility to learn the local language, however widely their own language is spoken, however superior they sincerely believe their own language to be.

For this reason, as democracy spreads and deepens throughout the world, especially in that majority of its states whose populations are more than marginally plurilingual – bearing in mind that there are 6000 languages but only 211 sovereign states – , the linguistic territoriality principle will and should play an ever more important role. In the absence of such a principle, it seems, there is no hope for a durable peace in Flanders, Quebec or Catalonia, nor in Kosovo, Kurdistan, East Timor or Sri Lanka. Without it, no prospect of more than a shaky survival for more than a small minority of the languages of the world. The growing importance of the territoriality principle for the preservation of weaker languages constitutes my first premise.

## **2. Foreign languages in a global regime: a world-wide lingua franca**

My second premise concerns the composition of plurilingual portfolios. Bilingualism and plurilingualism have been widespread phenomena for a long time, especially among settled populations whose native idioms differ more or less markedly from the official school idiom, and among most transnational migrant families all over the world. But what is comparatively novel – beyond a small elite of scholars and merchants – is the knowledge of two or several national languages by non-migrants. Compared to the slow dynamics of first languages – whose rhythm is dictated, even under the most ruthless of Gellner-type regimes, by the succession of generations –, the dynamics of second languages operate much faster and are crucially sensitive to the interaction between the language choices of different people.

Whether the choice is made by individuals, by schools, or by education authorities, choosing to invest in the learning of a particular second language can be motivated by all sorts of considerations, including the (alleged?) intrinsic beauty of the language, the prestige of the literature it gives direct access to, or its degree of proximity to one's own native language. But now that this plurilingualism reaches far beyond a small scholarly elite, the option for a particular language is bound to be predominantly motivated by the extent to which it increases the quantity of (accessible and potentially interesting) people and documents one can have direct access to. This quantity in turn is to a significant extent affected by the slow dynamics of mother tongues. But it is affected even more by the second language choices of people with different native languages. If I live in francophone Switzerland, for example, my incentive to learn Italian will be less if I know that most Ticinesi can speak French and my incentive to learn Schwyzdütsch will be very small if I know standard German and know that all Schwyzdütsch speakers also know Hochdeutsch.

Decisions structured in this way strongly interact with each other, according to predictable patterns, some of which have been neatly explored with the tools of game theory.<sup>5</sup> It is not difficult to understand, for example, that the more the speakers of a particular language A (say, French) learn another language B (say, English), the less incentive there is for other people – and not just the native speakers of language B – to learn language A. Nor is it difficult to understand that the more institutions and individuals have already included a particular language in their portfolio of foreign languages, the more incentive there is for other institutions and individuals in other areas to do the same. It follows that once a language has taken a clear lead, the mechanism is likely to snowball, as more and more people will rationally converge towards the same lingua franca.<sup>6</sup>

There have of course been many regional *linguae francae* in the history of the world, with several of them shrinking back to the comparatively small group of their native speakers. Think of Greek, for example, which once served as the common medium for people with countless different native languages in the Eastern Mediterranean area – it was the language in which Christ had to stutter with Pilate – , but which, unlike Latin, whose offspring now span the world, has retreated to the area in which it serves as a mother tongue. Today

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, at different levels of formalisation, Laitin (1988, 1993), Selten & Pool (1991) and de Swaan (1993, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Initially used to refer to a mixture of Provençal and Italian ("language of the Franks") that served as a medium of communication across linguistic communities at the time of the Crusades (see Edwards 1994: 217), the expression now refers to any language that is widely used as such a medium, whether or not it is from the start, or gradually, becomes, the native language of some of the communities it connects together.

there are still a number of regional *linguae francae*, such as Swahili in large areas of sub-Saharan Africa, Hindustani in the Indian subcontinent, classical Arabic in North Africa and the Middle East. But only one language can hope to become the first (and predictably only) universal *lingua franca* of the first (and predictably only) speaking species on the planet Earth. It is not the language with most native speakers and, providing the linguistic territoriality principle is allowed to stick, will never become it. It is not the language for which the average knowledge is highest, though it may become it soon. It is a language which has no intrinsic virtue, no phonetic or syntactic advantages, no aesthetic superiority that might have predestined it for such an exceptional fate. It is the sloppily pronounced mixture of a Germanic dialect once spoken in Schleswig-Holstein and of a Romance dialect once spoken in Normandy. It is a hybrid that gradually solidified and slowly spread throughout Europe's largest island, before invading some surprisingly underpopulated areas much further afield and starting there, in resolutely Gellner-like fashion, an impressively effective job of linguistic cleansing through conversion.

This language – you might have guessed it – is English. I became convinced of its irreversible emergence as the *lingua franca* of the world – which will be my second premise – on one Sunday morning in a suburb of Beijing, at the very heart of the world's most populated – and therefore, one might have expected, most unyielding – language area. My host had taken me to a market where people were trading goods in bulk. I there heard a Chinese and a Lithuanian trader bargain over the price of a huge bag of shoes. Not in Russian nor in Chinese, hence in neither of the *linguae francae* of the huge empires in which they respectively lived, but amazingly – so far from England and the United States – in broken English. This anecdote weighs more in my conviction than all the statistics I ever saw. Yet statistics are a useful safeguard. Appendix 2 supplies two tables to make the empirical basis of my argument less anecdotal.

### **3. High-skill migration (1): the ground floor as a linguistic attractor**

The OECD's latest migration report emphasises the deepening of a recent trend, the migration of high-skilled workers with a temporary status which, with countless variations between countries, could often be turned into a permanent one. One striking fact about this trend, apart from its swelling, is its asymmetrical nature. The number of people admitted under this status went up from 123.000 in 1992 to 177.000 in the United States in 1996, whereas it stagnated at around 2.000 per year in France over the same period (SOPEMI 1998: Table III.1). While the percentage of the high-skilled among temporary immigrant workers was consistently around 70percent in the US throughout the nineties, and around 40percent in the UK and Canada, it oscillated around 15-30percent in France. No wonder, then, if some French commentators got somewhat alarmed when these figures were published, and even more so when

it was mentioned in the press that an estimated 40.000 high-skilled French citizens were living in California alone.<sup>7</sup>

My conjecture is that this asymmetry may have something to do with the linguistic globalisation process briefly documented in the previous section. It follows from what I offer as my third premise, the claim that the migration of high-skilled workers is (and will increasingly be) affected by linguistic considerations. Let me try to lend credibility to this claim in a very simple way. Suppose you belong to the high-skilled and are thinking of moving to a country whose language is different from yours. Which country you will seriously consider moving to will no doubt be affected by many factors, and above all by job opportunities. However, (1) which job opportunities you are likely to be best informed about will be significantly affected by whether or not you know the country's language; (2) which job opportunities you feel you would be (or could quickly become) suitable for will be affected by how well you master the country's language; (3) if you have a partner and children above, say, the age of three, which country you would find it sensible to move to is bound to be influenced by which languages they understand and speak, or could easily learn; and (4) how genuinely welcoming a country's local population is likely to be towards foreigners will also depend on how well they can expect the newcomers to master their language.

All these considerations have some weight for migrations of all sorts, but there are four reasons why they can be expected to be particularly weighty for the migration of the high-skilled. First, the latter are likely to have decent job opportunities at home and can therefore afford the luxury (relative to the needs of sheer survival) of not inflicting too much of a linguistic adjustment cost on themselves and their families. Second, the sort of job for which they would qualify generally has far greater linguistic requirements than unskilled jobs. Third, the probability that high-skilled workers and their families already have, before migration, a good knowledge of at least one foreign language is far higher than for other workers. Finally, unlike the less skilled, the high-skilled have a sizeable probability of having gone abroad to study, and where they have studied is bound to affect where they may later consider moving to, while being greatly affected not only by what languages they know, but even more by what language they find important to try to know better.<sup>8</sup> For these reasons,

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<sup>7</sup> See Mamou (1999).

<sup>8</sup> For example, the French education authorities are said to be worried about the drop in the number of foreign students in France (from nearly 140.000 in 1993 to slightly over 120.000 in 1997, including the children of foreign residents). The French share in the world-wide population of foreign students is declining steeply from 13.6% in 1985 to 8.5% in 1997. This compares poorly, not so much with the 560.000 in the US, but with the 200.000 in the UK and the 180.000 in Australia. A quadrilingual web site has been set up in order to try to reverse the trend. (Tréan 1999, Delberghe 1999, Labbé & Recasens 1999, Reverchon 1999.)

the high-skilled workers' propensity to migrate may be expected to be far more biased than with other workers towards those countries whose language is best known abroad (and therefore also most useful to know better), and this bias is likely to increase as languages become more unequal in this respect.

In a world in which a number of mother tongues have developed into regional linguae francae, the asymmetry just described can be expected to generate a number of regional attractor basins into which the high-skilled will tend to descend from the linguistic hills formed by countries whose languages are hardly known abroad. But in a world characterised by the rise of a single lingua franca, we can expect the formation of a huge ground floor visible from all the linguistic hills and mountains of the world, from all the upper floors in which more obscure, less penetrable mother tongues are spoken, but in which the lingua franca is ever better known. This linguistic ground floor of the world incorporates all those portions of the earth whose official language is the world's lingua franca: essentially the British Isles, the greater part of North America and Australia. The OECD's observation and the (admittedly unsystematic) data on which it was based might be interpreted as reflections of this trend.

For our third premise – the conjecture that high-skilled people will have a significantly stronger propensity to migrate to countries which do not require them to know an unfamiliar language – has a direct corollary: if the native language of some area is becoming the lingua franca of the world and if other areas insist on the territoriality principle, then the migration flows of the high-skilled can be expected to display a growing asymmetry. As English is being snowballed into world-wide lingua franca status, the high-skilled of Finland and Hungary but also of Germany and France, will tend to wander more and more to the anglophone ground floor, without anything like a matching tendency for the high-skilled of the United States or Britain to climb up to the French plateau, let alone to the Hungarian peak.

#### **4. High-skill migration (2) : the upper floors' fiscal reponse**

Viewed from the ground floor, all this looks pretty good. First of all, the inexorable spreading of the lingua franca brings all kind of side-benefits to the natives of ground floor countries. For example, they are increasingly able to use hotels, restaurants, cabs, even local buses and trains all over the world without bothering to learn any of those complicated, sometimes silly-sounding languages, any more than if they were spending their holidays in Florida. Some of them will even increasingly enjoy the privilege of addressing just any international congress or writing in any international journal in their mother tongue, while realistically expecting to be understood straightaway by anyone who matters, indeed while realistically expecting anyone who matters to address them in that same mother tongue.

But the most relevant implication for my present purposes is of course that the spreading of the lingua franca is constantly swelling the pool of potential recruits for high-skilled jobs on the ground floor. With such a large pool, one can allow oneself to be selective.<sup>9</sup> True, not everyone on the ground floor gains from this inflow. If an American university offers a chair of engineering to someone from Korea, the American who would otherwise have got it may be very upset. But in a knowledge-based, human-capital-driven economy, there is undoubtedly much to be gained for scores of people on the ground floor, as an indirect result of this creaming off of the high skills of the rest of the world. And the more this economic effect is felt, the more attractive these places become, language aside, and hence the greater the scope for more creaming off.

Not surprisingly, seen from the upper floors, things look not quite so rosy. For suppose you are the government of Uruguay, or Finland, or even France and you give the brightest among your young people, at great expense, as good an education as you can, including of course its minimal linguistic component, the learning of the world's lingua franca. It is useful for them, and in principle also for you, if they further specialise abroad. If you let them choose, it is clear where they will want to go, providing minimum non-linguistic conditions are met: to a place where one speaks the language they know and want to know better still, i.e. somewhere on the ground floor of the world. And once they are there – even if they don't fall in love with a Korean or an Indian – they may well never return. Or if they do, they will constantly be vulnerable (from your point of view) to the attraction of job opportunities on the ground floor. Given the asymmetry pointed out earlier, it is clear that you cannot bank on a matching immigration of high-skilled workers from elsewhere. But given the ever more crucial role of human capital in wealth creation, you cannot afford to do without them and you need to make sure that a sufficient number of them will stay or return. What can you do? Here comes my fourth premise: if the asymmetric skill flow is to be counteracted, the only significant instrument within a government's easy reach consists in trying to guarantee competitive net incomes to the high-skilled by reducing the redistributive system that operates at their expense.

This may take the form of a reduction in higher income tax rates, or of a substitution of proportional or regressive consumption taxes for progressive income taxes, or of an expansion of tax exemptions that primarily benefit affluent taxpayers. It may even take the form of a shift of government expenditures in a direction that favours high earners: towards subsidised opera

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<sup>9</sup> Over 70 percent of workers granted a temporary immigrant status in the US in 1996 can be identified as high-skilled, compared with less than 7 percent in France (SOPEMI 1998: Table III.1). See also Arthur Schlesinger's (1998: 127) compact account of US immigration policy: "We have shifted the basis of admission three times this century – from national origins in 1924 to family reunification in 1965 to needed skills in 1990."

performances, public golf courses, convenient airports and away from subsidies to low-paid jobs and benefits to the unemployed, towards the cleaning or policing of the better neighbourhoods at the expense of education or public transport in the poor ones. For upper floor governments subjected to this pressure, in other words, the only option appears to consist in downsizing their redistributive ambitions, in shrinking those aspects of their welfare states that go beyond insurance, in reducing public expenditures that effect genuine transfers from high to low earners.

## 5. The dilemma: Lose your heart or lose your soul !

We have thus moved step by step from some considerations about language learning to gloomy forecasts about the collapse of the welfare states of nations with small languages – which will gradually mean nations with anything but English as their national language. The emerging claim can be put in the form of the dilemma I announced at the start. This dilemma can now be spelt out on the basis of our four premises or their direct corollaries:

- (1) If weaker languages are to survive, the countries which house them will (increasingly) have to insist on the linguistic territoriality principle (the territorial imperative).
- (2) Plurilingual portfolios do and will increasingly tend to contain English (the first world lingua franca).
- (3) If some area's native language emerges as a world lingua franca and if the territoriality principle is in place elsewhere, a growing bias will develop, among the high-skilled, towards the lingua franca countries (the ground floor as a linguistic attractor).
- (4) If there is a significant asymmetric skill drain and if the associated fall in the standard of living is to be avoided, then the upper floors' governments have no real option but to reduce net taxation on high-skilled labour income (asymmetric tax competition).

Thus, under the pretty mild assumption that a chronic skill drain cannot be tolerated, premise (4) says that offsetting the language-driven migration bias requires rolling back the upper floors' welfare states, or at least their compassionate components. In other words, it requires them to lose their heart. On the other hand, the conjunction of premises (1) to (3) implies that an ever greater migration bias for the high-skilled is unavoidable, but only so long as countries with weaker languages want to preserve them, and thereby to secure the survival of their distinct culture. In other words, the strong pressure on the upper floors' heart can only be relieved if they are willing to give up their soul.

To paraphrase, the upper floor's predictable heart loss is avoidable, but only on condition that the countries concerned accept to abandon the protection of their national languages in order to try to make it just about as easy to get along with the lingua franca on their own territories as in places where it is the mother tongue. If applied universally, this would practically amount to flattening the linguistic surface of the globe, with enhanced human capital mobility all over, and hence tougher competition between states everywhere to attract or retain the high-skilled. Nonetheless the first movers – the first soul-losers – will gain a clear advantage. By providing a welcoming environment to all those high-skilled (and their families) with sufficient knowledge of the world's lingua franca, they will share (be it imperfectly) with the current ground floor the great asset afforded by the asymmetry. In other words, giving up the linguistic territoriality principle will amount to ditching an increasingly serious handicap in the competition for human capital, and losing one's soul is therefore the price these countries may be willing to pay for avoiding an unnecessarily early and/or unnecessarily massive loss of their heart. This heart will still be threatened by fiscal and social competition from other areas of the expanding ground floor, but the pressure will be less than when the countries concerned had to fund an extra premium to the high-skilled, because of the much smaller pool from which these had to be drawn.<sup>10</sup>

Each of my factual premises could no doubt do with some closer empirical scrutiny and with a more refined, possibly qualified formulation. But I am confident enough in the robustness of the pattern formed by the four premises, with the sharpening of the dilemma firmly driven by premise (2) – the henceforth inexorable emergence of a world lingua franca. Even if all my factual premises are true, however, one might still question that their conjunction generates a genuine dilemma.

"What's all this fuss about lost hearts?", one might well ask, "We should rather be talking about taming Leviathan or Procrustes. It is all to the good of the upper floors if the credible threat of a brain drain severely inhibits their states' Procrustean propensity to equalise through taxation." To tackle this sort of challenge, there is no need to deny that the disciplining of rulers by a mobile tax base may sometimes provide a powerful and salutary lever for instilling respect for the rule of law, or for fostering the efficiency of the public sector, or for promoting a better match between the public goods supplied by a government and those the populations really want. But we live in a world in which globalisation, privatisation and Trade Union decline make factor incomes ever more unequal. We also live in a world in which secularisation, marital instability and geographical mobility keep eroding the once powerful

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<sup>10</sup> By massively increasing mobility, the world-wide abolition of linguistic diversity would put strong pressure on every nation's heart. In comparison, the preservation of linguistic diversity combined with one lingua franca reduces overall competition (not all places are real options for the high-skilled), but puts all non-lingua-franca countries at a competitive disadvantage.

income-sharing function of the family. For these two sets of reasons, the redistributive role of the tax system is more crucial than ever to the achievement of anything remotely resembling social justice.<sup>11</sup> If it turns out that, in the wake of financial and industrial capital, the upper floors' English-speaking human capital has to be immunised from redistributive taxation, it will be impossible for anyone who cares about distributive justice not to be deeply concerned. The first horn of the dilemma, therefore, cannot be dismissed as innocuous.

"What's all the fuss about lost souls?", one might ask next, "In a high-mobility, high-contact world, lifting the territoriality principle would no doubt eventually result in flattening the linguistic surface of the Earth. But this would amount to nothing more terrible than turning the whole planet into a large number of Republics of Ireland, with only vestiges of the local languages – in the names of most places, of many people and of a few institutions – and with a somewhat idiosyncratic way of pronouncing the lingua franca now promoted to mother tongue status. Why would it be such a loss, especially if matched against the tremendous economic and cultural advantages of sharing the same language world-wide? For then we shall all share not only the ground floor dwellers' current privileges – we shall then all enjoy the convenience of being able to use our mother tongue in all the conference rooms and hotel lobbies of the world –, but incomparably more will be within our reach: even in the most remote bazaars, farmyards and playgrounds, we will be able to understand directly what the locals are saying to each other, while the penetration of world-wide media and the massively enhanced transnational mobility would prevent the stable development of mutually unintelligible dialects. Once again, all human beings will « speak the same language and form a single people », and hence possibly « no goal will be unachievable for them » (Genesis 11.6). Is there anything to prevent us from looking forward to this new stage in the progress of mankind, apart from the irrational fear that a jealous Yahweh may strike once more and cruelly thwart our neo-Babelian hubris?

Yes, there is, and not only if we happen to belong to the tiny minority of professional linguists, who are understandably unlikely to welcome the vanishing of over 99 percent of their subject-matter, or if we belong to the slightly less tiny minority of translators and interpreters, who would end up losing their sources of income, or if we are numbered among those select few aesthetes who love steeping themselves in delightfully varied linguistic environments. I do sympathise with those who would bemoan hearing nothing but English in Tuscan village bars or in the lanes of Rio's favelas. But stronger

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<sup>11</sup> I present and defend what I mean by social justice in Van Parijs (1995). However, this claim holds under many possible interpretations of what social justice requires, and under all minimally plausible ones.

arguments are needed if the attraction of universal communicability is to be successfully questioned. Such arguments exist: they are of two types.

The first type of argument stresses the long-term general benefits of linguistic diversity. Given the nature and reach of present and future media, linguistic diversity is the firmest, and increasingly the only serious protection of cultural diversity. And the latter permits a diversity of experimentation in private and social life, from which mankind as a whole will arguably, in the long run, benefit. Moreover, linguistic diversity is also the firmest, and increasingly the only realistic and acceptable brake on the transnational mobility of people. It is therefore a precious population stabiliser, whether for the sake of slowing down the disruption of small communities or for the sake of enhancing the economic and political viability of institutionalised solidarity. Despite an undisputably high cost in terms of impediments to transnational communication and investment in second-language learning, the long-term consequences of linguistic diversity are therefore such that the general interest requires its preservation through a firm enforcement of the linguistic territoriality principle. So at least this first type of argument goes. To settle its validity, a more precise characterisation of the general interest is no doubt essential, and more relevant evidence would be most welcome to guide long-term speculation. But given the irreversible nature of the process, the irreducible need to rely to some extent on speculation cannot disqualify this type of argument.

The second type of argument is far less speculative. It relates to what unavoidably happens in the transition from a situation of linguistic diversity to one in which one of the pre-existing languages becomes everyone's mother tongue. Having a mother tongue different from the one adopted as the *lingua franca* puts one at a multiple disadvantage. People in that position have to bear the heavy cost of acquiring proficiency in a foreign language. Even after having borne this cost, they are still handicapped, relative to natives of the *lingua franca*, in economic and political competition. Their self-respect may even be seriously undermined as a result of the subordinate status given to something as deeply associated with themselves (in other people's eyes and their own) as their mother tongue. But as long as the linguistic territoriality principle is firmly in place, there is, for most non-*lingua-franca* natives, a portion of the earth in which their own native language constitutes an asset, in which the mastering of that language constitutes, to use Benedict Anderson's (1993: 615) illuminating metaphor, a tariff to be paid by all non-natives, including the speakers of the *lingua franca*. But if the latter is given free rein, those who do not happen to have it as their mother tongue will not only have to pay the heavy bill of language learning and disadvantage on *lingua-franca* territory and in international contexts, they will have to start paying tariffs on their own soil. The argument, here, is no longer that language loss is soul loss and that this soul loss is not in the long-term interest of mankind, all things considered. It is rather that the process through which souls get lost necessarily involves a massive inequality of an unjust sort.

Admittedly, this injustice is limited to the transition period: the native English-speaking French in tomorrow's linguistically globalised world will not suffer from it any more than French-speaking Britons in contemporary France. But the transition can be both long and tough enough to badly affect several generations. Admittedly too, the injustice could in principle be alleviated through adequate compensation by its beneficiaries. At the very least, lingua-franca countries could pick up the full financial burden of lingua-franca learning in the rest of the world. The rest of the world would then still be paying the enormous opportunity cost of the time it spends learning the lingua franca. Moreover, such cost-sharing would do nothing to compensate for the systematic disadvantage from which non-lingua-franca natives would suffer in economic and political interaction all over the world, including at home, let alone for the wounds inflicted to their self-respect by the withering away of a language with which they identify. In any case, what political prospect is there for even a minimal cost-sharing? How could the electorates of the lingua-franca countries be persuaded that they owe the others anything? After all, they did not coerce the rest of the world into opting for this particular language, which happens to suit them very well. Nor did the rest of the world mean this choice as an altruistic gift which might call for an equally generous counter-gift. The high likelihood of transitional but massive injustice thus provides a second major type of argument against giving up linguistic territoriality, against resignation to soul loss.<sup>12</sup>

## 6. Softening the dilemma: three strategies

If the factual assumptions stick, the dilemma, therefore, is a real dilemma. On the one hand, the upper floors' fiscal counterattack – losing one's heart – is unambiguously objectionable on grounds of justice. On the other, lifting the territoriality principle is not an attractive prospect either: not only because soul loss, the vanishing of cultural diversity, may well have a negative long-term impact on the general interest, but also because the process leading to it would necessarily generate, and leave uncompensated, large and unjust inequalities. Upper floor countries are therefore right in trying to avoid both heart loss and soul loss. But they can only do so, if my four assumptions stick, at the heavy price of swelling a haemorrhage of precious human capital. Is there any hope of reducing this cost? Perhaps there is, in the form of three, and only three, strategies.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Spelling out the notion of justice which this argument requires is no straightforward matter. See Van Parijs (1998) for an attempt.

<sup>13</sup> These strategies can be understood as attempts to undermine the conditions under which our fourth factual assumption holds true. Two of them are further discussed in the final section of Van Parijs (1995).

One is the globalisation of redistribution. If the heart function is performed entirely on a global scale, each territory can safely be allowed to firmly protect its soul without any risk of heart loss. But even if – less unrealistically – only part of the redistribution were organised globally, this could significantly alleviate the pressure on more decentralised redistribution systems. For the more there is by way of systematic global redistribution, the less of a loss it is for each country when some of its precious assets, in particular parts of its human capital, leave in search of higher returns: some of their activity was taxed for the benefit of other countries before they left, and some will remain taxed for its own benefit after they leave. Symmetrically, the more there is by way of systematic global redistribution, the less there is to gain from attracting precious assets through lowering tax rates. Tax competition, therefore, can safely be expected to be far less fierce.<sup>14</sup> Of course, transnational redistribution is no easy matter. Even at the more modest level of the European Union, it falls far short of what market integration has created a need for. But what is clear is that to bring this about at the European level and beyond, we shall have to be more imaginative than before in designing both transnational transfer institutions that can combine autonomy, solidarity and responsibility, and supranational political institutions that can sustain them.<sup>15</sup>

Suppose now, not implausibly, that substantial transnational redistribution is still off the agenda. Can the upper floors then retain their precious human capital in a way that is less destructive than competition through lower tax rates – and less ineffective than the prohibition of foreign-language learning? It would certainly help if one could increase a country's overall efficiency without this requiring any shrinking of its redistributive system. And there is indeed no reason to suppose that greater efficiency and steeper inequality are tightly connected. There are even many circumstances – for example in matters of health care, education or land ownership – in which, on the contrary, a more equal distribution can be expected to boost the overall level of economic output.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, for a given economic output, an intelligent use of existing resources – from the taming of urban car traffic to an increase of workers' control over their working environment – can significantly boost the overall quality of life. An upper-floor country which does not offer the high-skilled a higher average net income than the ground floor may therefore still manage to stem the haemorrhage without lowering its

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<sup>14</sup> To the extent that the world lingua franca has also reached the less skilled and hence generated among them too a significant migration bias, such global redistribution could be viewed partly as a global subsidy to the upper floors in order to enable them to keep and feed the multitudes of less skilled people who would otherwise flood the ground floor, however hard the latter tried to control its borders.

<sup>15</sup> See Van Parijs (1999 and forthcoming) for further discussion.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Glyn and Miliband (1994), Bowles & Gintis (1998).

redistributive aspirations by finding ways of boosting sufficiently the average quality of life.

If this does not succeed, perhaps because all possible redistribution-preserving efficiency-enhancing options have been exhausted, there only remains the ultimate weapon: instilling such a high level of loyalty among the high-skilled that they will stay in their home country, or will return to it, even though they and their families could henceforth settle painlessly on the ground floor, thanks to their newly acquired linguistic competence, and enjoy there a higher standard of living. How could this be achieved? If there is any hope, it must come from one or both of the following directions. First, anything that helps firmly root people in particular family, work and neighbourhood communities can only increase the emotional cost of departure. If all working time is spent in an impersonal or isolated setting, all leisure time in front of a TV screen and all shopping time in anonymous supermarkets, there will be little of this nature to lose. But if life is so organised that relatives, colleagues and neighbours maintain warm relationships with one another, personal ties and allegiances will develop and form a very concrete, personal component of the loyalty needed to keep the high-skilled from being taken far away by their material self-interest. Second, there is a more abstract sort of loyalty, a patriotic attachment to the country as such, which conceivably could be deliberately fostered. The shrill promotion of national symbols can hardly be expected to do the trick. But the development of political, legal, economic and social institutions which citizens can be proud of need not be quite so ineffective, at least as long as national curricula and national media retain the capacity to make citizens aware of the existence of those institutions and of why they deserve their allegiance. Paradoxically, if education and public discussion can persuade citizens of all classes that generous institutionalised redistribution is the right thing to have, then high tax rates on the high-skilled may turn out to be a reason for them to stay, as well as – and possibly more than – a reason for them to go.

The globalisation of redistribution, the pursuit of efficiency without deepening inequality, and the nurturing of loyalty: these are the three strategies on the success of which the upper floor's hopes must hinge. Even in conjunction, however, they are unlikely to achieve more than the softening of a dilemma which will be with them as long as there are upper floors to talk about. By creating the ground floor, linguistic globalisation is gradually saddling the upper floor countries with a heavy handicap. This handicap is the source of the emerging dilemma whose causes and remedies have been schematically explored in this article. It is bound to move closer to the centre of the upper floors' political discussion and will stay there for many years to come.

### Appendix 1: Number of native speakers (in millions)

1	MANDARIN	885
2	SPANISH	332
3	ENGLISH	322
4	BENGALI	189
5	HINDI	182
6	PORTUGUESE	170
7	RUSSIAN	170
8	JAPANESE	125
9	GERMAN	98
10	WU CHINESE	77
11	JAVANESE	76
12	KOREAN	75
13	FRENCH	72
14	VIETNAMESE	68
15	TELUGU	67
16	YUE CHINESE	66
17	MARATHI	65
18	TAMIL	63
19	TURKISH	59
20	URDU	58

Source:

Ethnologue Web Site: Languages of the World, Top 100 Languages by Population (Figures rounded up upwards, updated February 1999)

## **Appendix 2 : Some illustrative aspects of linguistic globalisation**

**Original language of the official documents  
published by the European Commission**

Mid 1950s      Early 1980s      Late 1990s  
(4 languages)   (6 languages)   (11 languages)

French	100%	60%	40%
English	0%	30%	42%
Other	0%	10%	18%

**Sources:**

- Mid 1950s (European Coal and Steel Community): de Swaan (1998: 1)
- Early 1980s (unofficial estimates) : Laponce (1984: 160)
- Late 1990s (1997 official figures provided by the European Commission) : Smith (1998: 1).

**Comment:**

This index is instructive because the language of the document (before entering the translation process) is likely to closely reflect both the language spoken at the informal meetings that served to prepare the document, and the language in which its authors find it most important that the document should be quickly and correctly available.

The rise of English from 30 to 42 percent happened despite a decline (from 22 to 17 percent in the same period) of the proportion of EU citizens (and hence, presumably, of EU officials) with English as a mother tongue, as a direct result of German reunification and the joining of Spain, Portugal, Greece, Austria, Sweden and Finland.

**Percentage of Belgian residents who have studied in Belgium  
and say they can speak correctly at least one language in  
addition to their mother tongue**

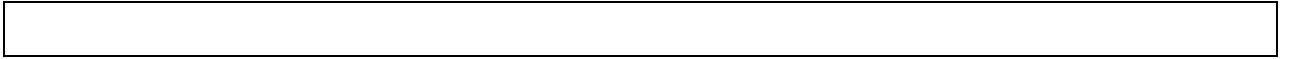
Age:	55+	35-54	15-34
Can speak correctly:			
the other national language	17%	23%	21%
English	11%	25%	36%
German	6%	5%	4%

**Source:**

February 1999 Survey by INRA Marketing Unit (Brussels) on behalf of TIBEM (Tweetaligheid in beweging - Bilinguisme en mouvement)

**Comment:**

Presumably, no one will challenge the interpretation of these data as reflecting the effect of belonging to a particular cohort (and hence the long-term dynamics) rather than the effect of age (as they grow older, people forget their English but keep improving their German!). The data are somewhat misleading, however, (1) because the younger age group may still significantly improve its linguistic skills later in life; (2) because the standards by which people assess the "correctness" of their linguistic competence may differ from one age group to another; (3) because the sample used over-represents the Brussels area, in which competence in both English and the second national language is significantly higher than in Flanders and Wallonia; and (4) because the fall in the knowledge of the second national language in the last period amalgamates an increase (from 31 to 35 percent) in the knowledge of French by Flemings and a further decline (from 12 to 4 percent) in the knowledge of Dutch by francophones. Nonetheless the data document beyond doubt how deeply Belgium's linguistic state of affairs has been altered in the space of one generation.



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