

Philippe Van Parijs

The lingua franca as a source of injustice

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The first Lecture for the XXIst Century is planned for November 13, and has the title 'Linguistic Justice for Europe, Belgium and the World'. Since we have absolutely no idea of what this title promises, nor even its discipline (law, linguistics, political science ?), we went directly to the speaker himself, Professor Philippe Van Parijs, who is attached to the UCL, KULeuven and Harvard.

Professor Van Parijs: "I regard myself as a philosopher. But being in charge of a chair in economic and social ethics, my work tends to involve more work and collaboration with economists, political scientists, lawyers, linguists and other social scientists than with other philosophers. I am currently working on a book entitled *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World*, to be published by Oxford University Press in the same series as my earlier book, *Real Freedom for All*. The lecture will present some of the central claims in that new book, while also using Belgium as an illustration.

My point of departure is that languages are unequal in status and spread, more than ever now that English has become the first ever worldwide lingua franca. For various reasons, I believe that this process of convergence towards one language known by all, be it as a second or third language, must be fostered rather than resisted. But the fact that the lingua franca is the native language of some people is a source of injustice in three distinct senses. I shall identify and illustrate these three senses: linguistic injustice as free riding, as unequal opportunity and as unequal dignity.

What do I mean by this? Free riding is co-operative injustice: the lingua franca is a public good which enables us to communicate across borders. But the native speakers of the lingua franca enjoy this benefit without contributing to it. They get a free ride from those who have to go through the hard job of learning a second language. Isn't this unfair? Unequal opportunity is distributive injustice. Those equipped from birth with a language in high demand are given a major advantage in an increasingly international labour market. Isn't this unfair? Unequal dignity is what could be called injustice in recognition. Collective identities are closely tied to native languages. And granting a systematic privilege to one of them amounts to downgrading,

even humiliating the identities associated with the "inferior" native languages."

Will Professor Van Parijs propose solutions to this problem?

"Yes I will. I shall argue, for example, that the plundering of the web may be the most realistic response to the anglophone's free riding; that prohibiting the dubbing of foreign films and encouraging subtitling is part of the answer to the distributive injustice generated by the dominance of English; and that the linguistic territoriality principle provides the only serious response to linguistic injustice as unequal dignity."

Does the fact that a lot of international students will attend his lecture affect its contents?

"Certainly. Firstly, because I shall make sure to appeal to the personal experience of students and scholars with an international trajectory. Secondly, because I shall highlight the universal nature of the issues discussed, the fact that they arise throughout the world. And thirdly, because I shall regard it as part of my task to introduce such an international audience to the linguistic conflict that has been at the core of Belgian political life for a century or so and has deeply marked the history of Louvain (or should I say Leuven?) itself. No doubt a delicate matter for a francophone Belgian who teaches both in Louvain-la-Neuve and in Leuven."

What is Professor Van Parijs's opinion on the English version of the 'Lectures'?

"For reasons close to the theme of my lecture, I believe this to be a pioneering step in a desirable direction, especially if it is not directed exclusively at a ghetto of foreign students, but also at a wider educated Flemish audience, which has now become even more competent in English than it used to be in French. However, for reasons I shall also discuss, it will remain important to keep a significant portion of higher education and of high-level cultural activity in the local languages. The *Lectures for the 21st century* should not end up replacing, but rather complement and support the *Lessen voor de 21ste eeuw*."