

177. Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove (1999). Foreword. In Rassool, Naz. **Literacy for Sustainable Development in the Age of Information**. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, vii-xvi.  
Foreword

The 'simple literacy' (basic reading, writing, numeracy) and the 'functional literacy' were presented as panaceas in the 1950s and the 70s, respectively. If everybody learned how to read and write, or learned this selectively, in the work-place, for production-oriented purposes, this would enhance development, both for the individuals themselves, and for their societies. Economic problems would be solved. The first one, with **mass literacy campaigns**, was the quick fix, and the second the not-so-quick-but-still-imaginable fix was Universal Primary Education, **UPE before the year 19XX**, XX being constantly postponed. As UNESCO have recently admitted and as Naz Rassool shows in this book, they have not worked.

Literacy, this time possibly also including functional computer literacy, as part of the necessary modernisation package, is still presented by the governments of "developing countries" and by UNESCO, the World Bank, the IMF and countless "aid" organisations as a panacea which will solve "development" problems. What Naz Rassool warns us about in this book is the next, much more sophisticated fix-in-making - which is not going to work either.

Planning for literacies is part of language planning and language policy. Arguments about the necessity of literacy have been sold under a broad umbrella which could be called **human rights and democracy arguments** (which include individual development arguments, cognitive benefits, fulfilling and optimising one's potential, right to information, etc, and arguments about informed participation). Arguments about benefits of literacy have in addition been sold as **arguments about economics**: better jobs for the individual, harnessing the mental resources of the population for economic progress and development of the whole society.

A full implementation of this language policy, making the whole world literate in the sense of the simple literacy (basic reading, writing and numeracy skills) would have been perfectly possible already decades ago. This has not happened. Overt arguments against literacy have mostly been about the **prohibitive cost**.

Literacy is about communication. When discussing the costs in relation to communication, it is important to differentiate between what I call 'physical' and 'mental' aspects, at two levels, in relation to **communication(s)** and in relation to **power and control**.

When people 'communicate' with each other, they can **travel themselves** or **exchange commodities** ('physical communication') or they can **exchange ideas** ('mental communication'). While the costs for physical communications are enormous, the return on investment (ROI) low and negative, and the rationale for much of the movement of commodities non-existent, except for market capitalism, the costs for mental communications are relatively much lower, the ROI much higher and with few side-effects, and the rationale a positive one for peace and democracy (on this, see, e.g. Sachs (ed.) 1992 and Galtung 1996). Languages are our most cost-effective communication tools.

Table 1

**Communication (physical or mental) as exchange of commodities or ideas**

	Physical communication: exchange of commodities	Mental communication: exchange of ideas
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	(including physical mobility of people)	
Means of communication	Motorways, roads, railways, airplanes, airports, bridges, tunnels, ships, etc	Spoken and signed languages, visual and aural images
Tools (vehicles) needed by individuals	Legs, bicycles, motorbikes, cars, lorries, etc	Physical apparatus for speaking, signing, reading; paper & pen, board & chalk, typewriters, TVs, computers, radios, music instruments, clothes, food, movement, etc
Cost for material investment by society	Massive (see Means above)	Relatively large (materials for language learning, training of teachers & translators, interpretation equipment etc)
Cost for material investment by individual	Relatively large for anything above bicycle	Relatively small for most basic tools
Cost for mental investment by society	Massive (research, planning, production, maintenance)	Relatively large (research, planning, interpretation & translation)
Cost for mental investment by individual	Relatively large (time & effort)	Relatively large (time & effort for language learning)
Return On Investment (ROI)	Negative, including environmental side-effects	Positive

The second aspect has to do with to what extent power and control is exerted via physical or mental means.

Table 2  
**Exerting power: means, processes and sanctions**

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**TYPE**

**MEANS**

**PROCESS**

**SANCTIONS**

## **PUNITIVE**

sticks

(physical)  
force

negative  
external  
(punishment)

(shame)

## **REMUNERATIVE**

carrots

bargaining

positive  
external  
(rewards,  
benefits,  
cooptation)

## IDEOLOGICAL

ideas

persuasion

internal

(guilt;

good or bad

conscience)

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(from Skutnabb-Kangas 1990, 16, mostly based on Galtung 1980)

When control is exerted through punitive or threatening measures, through a repressive state apparatus and further developments of this, the controller forces the controlled to pay the costs (for the military machinery and the techno-military complex, the police, the prisons, the mercenaries). The costs are again enormous and the ROI questionable for most of the world's population. In addition, the resources are prevented from being used for more positive purposes - all of us can cite figures for how few percent of the world's military budget would solve all the world's problems with clean drinking water, shelter, health services and basic education for all, or how much larger the increases in prison budgets in the USA have been than the increases in education budgets.

Control through carrots gives the controlled a bit more of their share of resources than control through sticks.

Control through ideas is the most important form of control, also because the controlled themselves pay for most of the control 'voluntarily', through supporting the consciousness industry: education, mass media, religions. They are being controlled through their own partial consent, through attempts at colonisation of their mind, their consciousness, in a hegemonic way. But hegemonic control also creates and enables resistance, counterhegemonies. In earlier hegemonic control where the legitimation came from a god, the controlled did not necessarily need to understand the overt messages in religions - these were often delivered in a 'sacred' language (Latin, classical Arabic, Sanskrit) not understood (at least fully) by the subjects. In 'cuius regio, eius religio' (the one 'owning' the region also decided about the religion for that region) it was enough to accept the legitimacy of the authority of the power-holder - this was the covert message.

In modern hegemonic control we can modify the thesis to: cuius lingua, eius cultura. The one who 'owns' the language also determines the content of the hegemonising message. This is of course the rationale for why the messages of McDonaldization (see below) come in (simplified) English and why everybody worldwide is supposed (and WANTS) to learn English. This enables global hegemonic control and the homogenisation needed for global markets.

But this control through ideas also means that there is more choice: by whose messages do you want your mind to be colonised?

In order to understand and critically reflect on the messages, to deconstruct them, you need to know the language of those messages well. You also need to appreciate what kind of messages go more often with what language. NOT because it would not be possible to express anything in

any language; you can certainly talk war - or peace - in any language. But it seems that the users of, e.g., Esperanto, have used the language often for messages of peace, democracy, harmony, conflict resolution, grassroots orientation. It also seems that 'international English' in consciousness industry is more often used for messages which may support less positive orientations and less reflection on the long-term consequences of a destructive life-style, destructive not only for the planet as a whole but also, here, specifically, for linguistic and cultural diversity. Not caring, not knowing.

Thus it is imperative to think of the different types of exertion of power and control and of the different means (including different languages) used for control, in terms of the cost for world peace, environment, biodiversity and linguistic and cultural diversity, the future of humankind on earth.

There are of course other possible alternatives to the emphasis on literacy. One is: literacy is soon not needed anymore.

Producing books is too slow, buying them too expensive, storing them too bulky, reading them too linear and boring, and you cannot search in them or even download them in two minutes. Everything is on Internet anyway. The Book is dead! Libraries will be like dinosaur parks - your greatgreatgrandchild will be taken there to see those funny things that existed in the old days. True?

Why should people in the "developing countries" need to become literate anymore? Television has taken over anyway, you just need to listen and watch. Like most youngsters in the West who don't read books (anymore). Like the American cartoon of two young teenagers watching the text which says WARNING VIOLENCE before a film. One asks: "What's it say?"; the other replies: "I dunno. I cant'read".

True?

We have for years been able to scan a text and get it out from the computer as synthetic speech. Very soon we will have cheap mini-synthetizors which transmit written text as speech. No need to read it yourself.

True?

Soon everybody in the world knows spoken English. We watch and listen to the same things. All of us have access. Then all of us, literate or not, are equal.

True?

NO! What Naz Rassool shows in this book is in fact that the literacies we need now and in the future **include** the "old" literacies - which have not been and are not going to be replaced or replacable. **In addition** they include multifaceted new skills and competencies and attitudes; in short, they demand much much more.

She argues that computers and multi-media technology, rather than eradicating reading, have led to 'the omnipresence of textuality, and, relatedly, reading and interpreting texts in our daily lives', and that 'in order to operate effectively within these textual environments, requires a more sophisticated range of knowledges, literacy and communication skills than the linear and functional skills traditionally associated with basic literacy'. She also shows that, despite new curricula and a lot of self-reflection, the literacies attempted today in most countries in the world and including what international agencies like UNESCO do (UNESCO has redefined its literacy targets several times during its life-time), are nowhere near delivering what they should, or even understanding what literacy means today and what functions it has. Literacy is a 'many meaninged thing'.

At the same time, half the world's population have never made a phone call. The polarisation

between 'information-rich' and 'information-poor' societies is sharpening.

My generation in the West may be in the lucky position of having had the best of the 'old' world, and the 'new' that Naz Rassool is writing about. We have full access to the new but have experienced both the old, and the transition, and (some of us) can choose, be critical and selective.

Can the youngsters of today do this? In the West, many have never experienced anything else but the hegemony of the technological 'information' society. In other parts of the world, the hegemony of the images created in the neo-evolutionary neo-liberalist markets discourse, through the consciousness industry, are so strong that there is little choice too.

Instead of the brutality of physical colonisation, what we have now is recolonisation and neocolonisation, where the means are increasingly cultural and linguistic (that is what the consciousness industry is about). The CONTEXT, though, is the power relations in which the meanings and images are produced, where legitimate knowledges and social relations are negotiated and validated or invalidated, where hegemonic meanings are challenged and where individuals and groups are disempowered or empowered.

The type of literacy Naz Rassool advocates in this book should not only enable people to 'analyse the representations and significations of multi-media text but also the institutions in which they are produced and, in turn, their relationship with specific ideological, political, economic and cultural interests that underscore the social milieu'. The 'interpretative framework also includes taking account of **structural** inequalities' (those inherent in the social system), and **structured** social inequalities (resulting from policies). Unless literacy leads to a capacity to analyse those power relations it will, once again, reproduce disempowerment.

Promises connected to literacy seem to work like the promises connected to the English language: they are used like carrots to entice powerless groups into letting the exploitation continue. If you only learn X (to read; to speak English), you'll be better off, get a better job, develop, become civilised - and people put a lot of effort into learning. When they have succeeded and want the promised benefits, they are being told: X is not quite enough, you need XY and then paradise will descend (to be able to fill out forms and read instructions; to pass these English exams). As an Indian colleague said, after a meeting where a small grant was given to the street sweeper working three jobs to be able to send his child to an English-medium school: 'earlier they were excluded because they did not know English; now they are excluded because of their bad English'.

In the basic literacy discourse, 'development' was claimed to be hampered by the masses of illiterate people in an 'underdeveloped', 'backward', 'traditional' country. It was the development today reflected in the terms "the developed countries" and "the developing countries", where the evolutionary paradigm is the set scene ('they are lower than us'), where the norm is clear ('once they become like us...') and where it is only some who still need to develop because they are still (constructed as) deficient in relation to the norm.

The functional literacy targets also promoted the kind of development which demanded structural adjustment programmes to be pressed down on African and other countries by the World Bank and the IMF, programmes which did not work and made the poor still poorer. The new literacy requirements which include simple computer literacy, again legitimate the poverty and structural unemployment, especially in the South but also to some extent in the North, with the hegemonic discourse which, as usual, blames the victim, referring to deficiencies in the victims: positive characteristics, skills, knowledges and attitudes which the victims lack. This time around they lack the technological skills and capacities to function in a post-modern

information society.

When some of the world's nuclear waste was about to be sent to Saturn in October 1997, NASA (the American space travel administration) were shocked by the **millions** of protests from many parts of the world (mostly the West) pouring in - the whole campaign was organised just in a few days via Internet. Individuals getting in contact with other individuals on the other side of the world, finding common ground and acting; miracle of grassroots-organisation, quick reaction. Freedom of information and expression, direct access to knowledge without censorship, teledemocracy? Learning more about each other, respect and tolerance, PeaceNet, EcoNet, ConflictNet? International understanding, community?

OR

Economic, military and political frameworks, with their concomitant consolidation of information and knowledge hegemonies deciding who gets access to what (hardware, information), the gap between the information-poor and information-rich widening - information increasingly being a commodity to be accumulated for profit. Interacting more in the virtual reality than in the family and neighbourhood, losing contact with 'real' reality. Individualised mass-customised information flows - you can choose your news and exclude what you do not want to hear. Except the databanks sell the information about you for commercial purposes so that your email is filling up with junk mail from advertisers. The diversity that is promoted worldwide is the right of the elites to choose between 600 tooth pastes. The lack of symmetry in contemporary processes of globalization is symbolised by what Cees Hamelink (1994, 112) calls **McDonaldization**: 'aggressive round-the-clock marketing, the controlled information flows that do not confront people with the long-term effects of an ecologically detrimental life-style, the competitive advantage against local cultural providers, the obstruction of local initiative, all converge into a reduction of local cultural space'. The trend in McDonaldization is towards production for global markets, so that products and information aim at creating "global customers that want global services by global suppliers" (ibid., 110). The multimedia, including the Net, in fact make McDonaldization virtual while at the same time glorifying it and creating the images of success in the world to correspond to the McDonaldized personality and life-style. A wrong educational language policy, organised against most scientific evidence about how education should be organised if it is to promote high levels of multilingualism (see articles in Skutnabb-Kangas (ed.) 1995), has been the order of the way in most countries. It has involved linguistic genocide for linguistic minorities and monolingual reductionism for linguistic majorities, coupled with inefficient foreign language teaching, and in both cases blaming the victims for the results. Only elites have benefitted.

In underdeveloped countries this wrong policy, in many cases promoted, advocated and partially financed by the West with its experts, is

- the most important **pedagogical** reason for 'illiteracy' in the world.

- the most efficient way of preventing the grassroots from organised resistance to continued neocolonial exploitation.

Western language policies have to a large extent been based on **false either-or thinking** (you need to choose **between** languages, you cannot have both this language and that language and maybe others too). It has also promoted **subtractive** rather than **additive** language learning: the learning of a dominant language has been presented as necessarily happening at the cost of a dominated language, instead of in addition to it.

The West has led and continues to lead the way in irrational language policies, in linguistic and cultural genocide and in prevention of linguistic human rights, and the West is trying to spread



the ideas in this irrational language policy to other parts of the world (with a fair success). An interesting issue is the role of language in general and the changing conceptions of literacy in particular in this process of reproducing unequal power relationships.

In constructing counterhegemonies, several types of analysis are urgent.

**Firstly**, we have to analyse the role of states and international organisations. Who controls them, and for whose benefit do they work? We cannot rely on the states, controlled by elites, to be nice and rational. The pressure has to come from the grassroots. Literacy is often needed for grassroots movements to grow strong.

**Secondly**, we have to relativize the question of costs. What are necessary communications? What are necessary costs for these necessary communications? Physical communication costs enormous sums, pollutes the planet, transports often unnecessary things, often unnecessarily. We have to make it cheaper to produce food and commodities locally where it is possible and instead use the moneys for improved mental communication. This includes supporting sophisticated literacies, linguistic and cultural diversity and the learning of additional languages.

**Thirdly**, the messages in mental communication are important. Whose messages do we want to speak/sign? By which ideas do we want our minds to be colonized globally - by messages or coca-cola and mcdonald or by messages of peace, democracy and sustainable development? We have to analyse the sophisticated means used for control, especially control through ideas, and we have to analyse linguisticism (akin to racism and sexism) and other means of hierarchization and their cooperation and coarticulation.

**Fourthly**, we who are multilingual must stop being tolerant of the monolingualism of linguistic majority populations in the big dominant countries. **They** are the ones who cause much of the costs - but we pay, because so far we have agreed to learning their languages in order for communication to work, while many of the Brits and North Americans and French and Russians and Chinese have not learned our languages.

Yukio Tsuda (1994) talks about an 'diffusion of English paradigm' (connected with capitalism, science and technology, modernization, monolingualism, ideological globalization and internationalization, transnationalization, Americanization and homogenization of world culture and linguistic, cultural and media imperialism), and an 'ecology of language paradigm' (connected with a human rights perspective, equality in communication, multilingualism, maintenance of languages and cultures, protection of national sovereignties and promotion of foreign language education). We need to stop tolerating both monolingual reductionism and the 'diffusion of English'-paradigm and start advocating for an 'ecology of languages'-paradigm which includes minimally bilingualism but hopefully multilingualism for ALL.

**Finally**, we have to show the controlling elites that the world is NOT a zero-sum game. It is not necessarily so that if we win, they have to lose. Both can win, for instance from a rational languages policy and from the granting of linguistic human rights to everyone, including the sophisticated literacies that Naz Rassool advocates in this brilliant, path-breaking book.

Or, at least: if the irrationality continues, everybody, including the dominant elites, loses.

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