

47 Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove (1998). Language rights: Not political but scientific correctness.
English Today 56 (14:4), October 1998, 40-43.

Not political but scientific correctness.

A reply on language rights.

Tove Skutnabb-Kangas

"Roskilde University is the home of the Language Rights Movement, the base of Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson, who, together and separately, have published numerous books and articles on Language Rights, which promote, among other things, the provision of education in the mother tongue for all, and which decry the dominance of English" reports Anthea Fraser Gupta (AFG), University of Leeds (formerly Singapore), in a contribution to **English Today** (13:2, 1997, 24) called Language Rights. The topic is important but we regret to see it (and ourselves) mishandled so crudely. Her text typifies how controversy about language can generate heat without much light. The topic is far from as murky as AFG presents it. There is a substantial scholarly literature on it (see suggested reading below) with many issues, scientific, political and personal at stake. All I can do here is attempt to remedy a few of AFG's worst mistakes and misrepresentations.

Does one represent a movement if one is interested in, writes about and co-organizes conferences on a topic? If so, the Language Rights Movement is indeed huge, and most of the people and organizations in it (including us) do not know that they belong to a movement. A few examples.

The OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, with 55 member states, including all of the countries of Europe and the former Soviet Union, as well as the United States, and Canada) has a High Commissioner on National Minorities, Max van der Stoep, a senior Dutch diplomat and former Minister, whose task is "to defuse tensions in situations which in his view may develop into violence" (The Foundation... 1997, 19).

"When tensions threaten to erupt into violent conflict, the High Commissioner can issue an 'early warning' to the political decision-making bodies of the OSCE" (ibid.). The High Commissioner's experience is that "education is a matter of particular importance in inter-ethnic relations" (ibid.), and the right to mother tongue medium education is a core issue here. The High Commissioner firmly believes that in order to address disputes which "have the potential to erupt into armed conflict" (van der Stoep 1997, 6), states "will have to realise that [their] interests are better served by following a generous policy towards minorities rather than by sticking to a minimalist approach" (ibid., 7).

Therefore, the High Commissioner developed, with the help of a group of experts, **The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities and Explanatory Notes**, "with the aim being to further clarify, interpret and elaborate international standards with regard to minority education" (The Foundation... 1997, 29). The **Recommendations** include a right to mother tongue medium education for minorities and make it a duty for the states to provide this and to train teachers. It is also recommended that teachers who teach the majority language as a second language to minority children be bilingual - this of course enhances the bilingualism that is one of the goals in minority education. All these are language rights recommendations that I have promoted for many years and they are what AFG has such difficulty in accepting.

The **Recommendations** were developed in several Expert Consultations with a group of 9 experts (including TSK), among them some of the world's most respected international human rights lawyers specialising in minority issues.

The **Recommendations** are right now being distributed to inter-governmental, governmental and non-governmental bodies throughout the OSCE region, and they were "well received" by all categories of participants at the Seminar in Vienna in November 1997 where they were made public, and "seen as a positive contribution to the promotion of the education rights of national minorities" (ibid., 20).

Does this mean, then, that OSCE governments, international lawyers, the High Commissioner, etc, are part of this Movement that TSK and RP house in Roskilde? On this, the Commissioner has the following to say: "It is important to note that the High Commissioner has not been designed as an instrument to protect minority rights or to act as an ombudsman for minorities. The position is titled the High Commissioner **on** National Minorities and not **for** National Minorities" (OSCE 1997, 4-5).

The **Explanatory Notes** also confirm that the type of education that AFG **would** like for minorities, namely submersion, does not fulfil the requirements of international law, as interpreted by legal Experts:

[S]ubmersion-type approaches whereby the curriculum is taught exclusively through the medium of the State language and minority children are entirely integrated into classes with children of the majority are not in line with

international standards (p. 5).

The imaginary Movement obviously also includes all the human rights lawyers who write about educational and other language rights in the same vein as we do, including such top names as Gudmundur Alfredsson, Asbjørn Eide, Patrick Thornberry, Fernand de Varennes (see bibliography; two of them participated in drafting the **Recommendations**). Or the broad geographical and disciplinary range of contributors to our (TSK, RP) book **Linguistic Human Rights**. Or people giving papers at the Hong Kong Language Rights conference (which we co-organized with the Hong Kong team) which so confused AFG - maybe because there were many different paradigms represented? The South African government is also part of this Movement because the new Constitution gives broad language rights to speakers of the 11 official languages?

It is of course everybody's right to imagine what they want but the type of misrepresentation of our (and other people's) position that AFG engages in does not seem very scholarly to us (and includes many of the traits of misinformation analysed in Cummins 1994). In her version, the "basic tenet of the language rights movement is that minorities should be educated through the medium of their mother tongue(s). This may be articulated as: a) allowing mother tongue education, or b) requiring governments to provide it, or c) requiring children to have it" (p. 25). AFG then proceeds to disagree with c). In fact she only seems to be disagreeing with herself. We do not know any serious people working in this area (linguists, educationists, human rights lawyers) who would agree with c). We certainly do not, and have made this very clear. I quote my definition, from a chapter called "Concept definitions" (1990, 13-14):

A language shelter programme or language maintenance programme is a programme where linguistic minority children with a low-status mother tongue **voluntarily choose (among existing alternatives)** to be instructed through the medium of their own mother tongue, in classes with minority children with the same mother tongue only, where the teacher is bilingual and where they get good teaching in the majority language as a second/foreign language, also given by a bilingual teacher (emphasis added).

Putting up straw people and insinuating that these would correspond to real people's (here our) positions and then fighting with these self-created windmills is done several times in the article. The misrepresentation goes as far as falsifying my handout from Hong Kong to suit AFG's strawperson. What I suggest in it is that "a universal declaration of linguistic human rights should **GUARANTEE** at an **individual** level" (capitals added) that everybody can, among other things,

learn the mother tongue(s) fully, orally (when physiologically possible) and in writing (which presupposes that minorities are educated through the medium of their mother tongue(s))

AFG has changed my "guarantee" to "DECLARE". If one does not know the difference in international law between 'declare' and 'guarantee' ('guarantee' here makes the state a firm dutyholder but does not put any obligation on the minority individual) the falsification may not seem important - but it just happens to suit a bit too well to strengthen AFG's false claims.

The same is true about another small but symptomatic change where AFG has made my plural 'other languages' to singular 'other language'. In general, there are in AFG's contribution many examples of what I often (e.g., 1996a) call "monolingual reductionism", which again are AFG's own inventions and thinking but are, falsely, attributed to us. These represent either-or thinking and false or unnecessary oppositions that we ourselves have criticized. Some examples of AFG's thinking:

- one has to choose either one language or the other, the mother tongue or the majority language - rather than both-and-and (which is our position);
- one has to choose either "a decent life and some empowerment" or "right to language maintenance" (p. 26) - rather than all of them (our position);
- language contact leads to "language shift [which] is an expected part of life" (p. 25) - rather than seeing language shift as a result of unequal power relations, a subtractive rather than additive language learning situation (our position). Language shift is in fact often a result of **lack** of language rights rather than any kind of voluntary choice, but a presentation of it as an economic necessity, without a causal analysis, does not even make economic sense because in this specific cost-benefit analysis it would be perfectly possible to keep the cake AND eat another cake, i.e. learn the economically important language **in addition** to the mother tongue(s) rather than instead of it/them. Just like both of us and many other people have done. This also means that **additive** English is in our view "a good thing" whereas subtractively learned English (or any other language) makes the learner poorer.

And so I could go on. It is, in fact, the subtractive language learning that AFG advocates that often leads to poor school achievement, with the concomitant (negative) consequences for "decent life" and "empowerment". Which is what the High Commissioner has taken the consequences of in his Recommendations.

What we personally also feel sad about is the arrogance attributed to us by AFG - according to her "language rights activists", i.e. we, "deny the ability of ordinary people to make decisions for themselves" (p. 24); we were flown in "from Europe to tell Asians what to do" (ibid.); we "are claiming knowledge, superiority and expertise which [we] deny to the individual language user, reader, or TV watcher. In promoting language rights they seem to deny other rights" (p. 26). In fact much of what we do is based on experience that "ordinary people" (here: not researchers or other elites) have shared with us. I will always remember the face of the old Sikh in Britain who after the long day came forward and said that he wanted to express the feelings of his whole community: "You spoke our soul". One of my books (translated into several languages, most recently into Slovak - but not English) was written at the request of literally hundreds of immigrant minority parents, mostly factory workers and cleaners, and of many indigenous peoples - and they use it. One of RP's books is in the process of being translated into Japanese, Chinese and Korean. We get constant (and embarrassingly positive) feedback from people all over the world who recognise what we say. We went to the Hong Kong conference on invitation, to learn, and to discuss with colleagues, not as ordinary or even alternative cultural imperialists. It is not only democracy and the self-determination of peoples (which is a human right - see e.g. Stavenhagen 1996) which are contingent on respect for language rights - maintenance of linguistic diversity is too. The new field of exploring the connections between biodiversity and linguistic and cultural diversity as prerequisites for life on our planet (Maffi 1996) also sees language rights, especially educational language rights, as vital (Maffi & Skutnabb-Kangas, in press). If linguistic diversity is to be saved (e.g., Krauss 1992), positive contributions are needed (see my 1996b). Serious scholarly discussion is minimum requirement. The first volume from the Hong Kong conference on Language Rights (Benson et al.) will provide diverse views on the subject, and so will the next conference in South Africa.

References and suggested reading:

Alfredsson, Gudmundur (1991). *Minority Rights: Equality and Non-Discrimination*. In Krag, Helen & Yuhneva, Natalia (Eds.) (1991). **The Leningrad Minority Rights Conference. Papers**. Copenhagen: The Minority Rights Group in Denmark, 19-41.

Alfredsson, Gudmundur (1995). *The Right to Human Rights Education*. In Eide, Krause & Rosas (Eds.), 213-227.

Benson, Phil, Grundy, Peter & Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove (Eds.) (in press). *Language rights*. **Language Sciences**, Special volume.

Capotorti, Francesco (1979). **Study of the Rights of Persons Belonging to Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities**. New York: United Nations.

Cummins, Jim (1994). *The discourse of disinformation: the debate on bilingual education and language rights in the United States*, in Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson (Eds.), 159-177.

Eide, Asbjørn (1995). *Economic, social and cultural rights as human rights*. In Eide, Krause & Rosas (Eds.), 21-40.

Eide, Asbjørn, Krause, Catarina & Rosas, Allan (Eds.) 1995. **Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. A Textbook**. Dordrecht, Boston & London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

Krauss, Michael (1992). *The world's languages in crisis*. **Language** 68, 4-10.

Maffi, Luisa (1996). *Language, Knowledge and the Environment: Threats to the World's Biocultural Diversity*. **Terralingua Newsletter** 2, December 1996.

Maffi, Luisa & Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove (in press). *Language diversity*. In Posey, Darrell (Ed.). **Human Values of Biodiversity**. New York: United Nations Environmental Programme.

Mühlhäusler, Peter (1996). **Linguistic ecology. Language change and linguistic imperialism in the Pacific region.** London: Routledge.

OSCE (1997). **Bibliography on the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities: Documents, Speeches and Related Publications.** The Hague: The Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations.

Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove (1990). **Language, Literacy and Minorities.** London: The Minority Rights Group.

Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove (1996a). Educational language choice - multilingual diversity or monolingual reductionism? In Hellinger, Marlis and Ammon, Ulrich (Eds.) **Contrastive Sociolinguistics.** Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 175-204.

Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove (1996b). Promotion of Linguistic Tolerance and Development. In Legér, Sylvie (Ed.) **Vers un agenda linguistique: regard futuriste sur les Nations Unies / Towards a Language Agenda: Futurist Outlook on the United Nations.** Ottawa: Can