
No good past Dover

JOHN EDWARDS

A review of foreign-language teaching in relation to the predominance of English in Europe and in the world at large

THE THEME of a conference of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (part of the Modern Language Association) in 2000 was the future of language teaching and learning. This meeting (held in Phoenix, Arizona) was quite unlike any other that I've attended. The participants were all department heads or administrators and, instead of papers on substantive scholarly topics, almost all the presentations were practical pieces: "how-to" sessions and the like.

I detected two main threads. There was, first of all, the sorry state of the language-teaching discipline, apparently trapped in a circle where declining enrolments mean fewer resources, where weakened resources mean decreased academic clout and respect. Second, it was easy to see the relative superiority of those involved in Spanish language and culture. The Hispanicists were clearly the nuclear physicists of the discipline: they knew it and so did all their lesser brethren.

My discussion here is based upon remarks made in Phoenix, and, while their initial context was thus an American one, I believe that the issues are of wider concern. In Britain, for instance, Baroness Blackstone, as Minister of Education, recently initiated an "awards programme" meant to encourage language teaching and learning, designed to heighten the motivation of language learners. It is, first of all, interesting to consider why such a programme suggests itself at all. Secondly, the Minister's politically correct remarks on language learning in a diverse world also suggest something of the power behind an opposite thrust – the recognition of diversity as simply more fuel for the English juggernaut:

The Government wholeheartedly supports the Europe-wide drive to stimulate language

learning. It is increasingly important in a world of international trade, commerce, advanced communication and tourism, where people and nations are interdependent ...¹

The tensions that exist in a world increasingly dominated by English, but also a world of linguistic and cultural diversity – these are the important matters which, perhaps unwittingly, the Minister touched upon in her rather formulaic remarks.

English in the world

These are difficult times for some languages – the small ones, the stateless ones, those of "lesser-used" or minority status, and so on. A recent conference exchange is illustrative here:

"What do you think of Gaelic now. Be honest!"
"Well, it's a language that may still do you some good in the Highlands and Islands, maybe still in parts of Cape Breton in Canada, but outside those little areas, it isn't going to take you very far..."
"Isn't it used in any other settings, then?"
"No, it's simple, really – no one to speak it with. Who did you have in mind?"
"Maybe Scots abroad?"
"Listen, outside Scotland, Gaelic speakers

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hardly use the language at all, even among themselves.”

“OK, but what d’you think of the language itself? Is it a good sort of language, or what?”

“Actually, I’m not too keen on it, as a language *per se*. It has become pretty bastardised, you know, bit of a mixture really – different dialects, English borrowings.....”

This surely has a familiar ring to it: a “small” language struggling against larger forces, a variety increasingly confined geographically and socially, a medium whose intrinsic status – however illogically, from a linguist’s point of view – is often felt to be degraded and impure. And, if it proves difficult to maintain such a language in something like its native state, what attraction does it possess for language learners elsewhere? Why would anyone study it at school or university? The elementary catch-22 operates here: how can you induce the learning of a language when its community of use is negligible – but how will the latter ever grow unless more join it? Who will, in due course, become the teachers of the language? The dreary downward drift seems fated to continue – a native community which is small, and a “secondary” community which may become the preserve of a tiny band of consciously-committed enthusiasts.

I have been deceitful here. The exchange about Scots Gaelic never took place. It is modelled, however, on this earlier passage:

“...What thinke you of this English tongue, tel me, I pray you?”

“It is a language that wyl do you good in England, but passe Douer, it is woorth nothing.”

“It is not vshed then in other countreyes?”

“No sir, with whom wyl you that they speake?”

“With English marchants.”

“English marchantes, when they are out of England, it liketh them not, and they doo not speake it.”

“But yet what thinke you of the speech, is it gallant and gentle, or els contrary?”

“Certis if you wyl beleue me, it doth not like me at al, because it is a language confused, bepeesed with many tongues: it taketh many words of the latine, & mo from the French, & mo from the Italian, and many mo from the Duitch...”

This is taken from Florio’s *First Fruits*. Published in 1578, it is a textbook and manual for the teaching of Italian to English gentlemen. The fruits “*yeelde familiar speech, merie Prouerbes, wittie Sentences, and golden sayings.*”

Also a perfect Induction to the Italian, and English tongues ... The like heretofore, neuer by any man published (as Florio modestly points out in his fuller title). John Florio was an exceedingly interesting character who played many different roles, language teacher and translator among them. He provided, for instance, an engaging – if sometimes rather loose – translation of Montaigne’s *Essays*, a translation read and used by Shakespeare. (His father, Michelangelo Florio, had translated the children’s catechism of Cranmer; published in 1553, this was the first Italian-language book printed in England.) In his time (c.1553–1625), French, Italian and Spanish were the powerful “international” varieties, widely studied in Tudor and Stuart England. Italian challenged the supremacy of French in both the cultural and the commercial worlds, and many prominent Elizabethans learned it. Indeed, the queen herself was a student, along with luminaries like Edmund Spenser and the Earl of Southampton, Henry Wriothesly – a literary patron to Florio and, more famously, to Shakespeare.²

Very few people in the sixteenth century would have predicted global status for English, a language with four or five million speakers, and well back in the linguistic sweepstakes. Indeed, we could go further back and consider what the fate of English might have been after the Norman conquest. And when that same conquest carried through to Ireland, in the twelfth century, it found an Irish language that had been secure for centuries, which had provided all of Europe with the only vernacular seen as suitable for education and literature, and which possessed considerable assimilative power over newcomers. With the advent of French and English speakers, of course, a process of change began – but this was initially neither rapid nor extensive. Only in towns within the Pale (roughly, the east coast, including Dublin) did French and English establish themselves – but the Pale itself tended to shrink as the Gaelicising of the new settlers continued: they became, as the old phrase put it, *Hibernis ipsis Hiberniores* (‘More Irish than the Irish’). In 1366, the Statutes of Kilkenny were passed, and the real import of the legislation was to try and keep English settlers from adopting Irish ways. (The three dozen statutes were, incidentally, written in Norman French – a telling indicator of linguistic and political realities.) The laws were not very effective and, by

1600, English flourished only within a diminished Pale and in one or two rural enclaves.³

The point is a simple one: the fortunes of languages rise and fall; the variety which, today, wields international influence on a scale never before seen, was once of very secondary importance and restricted utility. On the other hand, consider what has become of Norman French in the British Isles, and the present condition of the Irish language. The only surviving Celtic variety to have its own country, its ordinary vernacular status remains parlous.

It is easy to lose sight of this immediately demonstrable fact – particularly, of course, at a time when historical knowledge, and the contextualisation of current events to which its application must inevitably lead, are commodities of little priority. It is sometimes imagined that the global power of English represents a new phenomenon. It is, however, only the most recent manifestation of a very old one, although its strength and its scope are arguably greater than those possessed by earlier “world” languages: the difference, then, is one of degree rather than of principle. Of course, I don’t mean to argue that all this somehow lessens the impact of English upon other varieties; I simply want to suggest that social and linguistic struggles to resist the encroachments of English are not battles against demons never seen before. I would also not wish to belittle the anxieties felt by those whose languages and cultures are under threat. But all these things have happened before, and will no doubt happen again: it is an old play we are looking at here, a play whose plot endures while the cast changes – a kind of eternal *Mousetrap*.

A related point is that the rise and dominance of English around the world have uniquely profited from historical circumstance. Consider the fate of other great *lingua francas* – Greek and Latin, for example. They must have seemed imperishable, yet they faded away with the declining power of their speakers. Languages of “wider communication”, after all, have no special linguistic capabilities to recommend them; they are simply the varieties of those who have power and prestige. It seems necessary to repeat this truism quite frequently – and not merely for the benefit of those languishing in ignorance outside the academy. A recent observation has it that current linguistic dominance

lies very simply in the fact that English is more responsive than any other language to the

growing knowledge base that is the hallmark of these postmodern times. It is this ability to be eclectically open to new thoughts, new ideas, new concepts that has predisposed English to be the major medium of modern communication.⁴

It is undoubtedly the case that, more than (some) other languages, English has been an open and “loose” medium – ready to take what was needed from other varieties, to be flexible in the face of modern necessity, and so on. It is an egregious mistake, however, to think that it is such “openness” that accounts for dominance. The truth is rather more brutal. (I note in passing here that one occasionally reads a defence of some threatened “small” variety which is based upon its elegance of phrasing, its regularities, its linguistic “purity”, its marvellous literature: this language is just as good as the hulking neighbour next door. Unfortunately, as Mae West once said, *à propos* of diamonds, goodness has nothing to do with it.)

Historical precedent would have suggested that the decline of British power meant the decline of English. But, as we all know, power shifted to the other side of the western ocean, and so English received a renewed lease on life. Less often thought about, perhaps, is what the current broad presence of English – largely attributable in recent times to American influence and economic clout – means for the continuity of the language. People talk, for example, about eastern economies, about the countries of the “Pacific Rim” whose collective power may prove to be the replacement to current American dominance. Maybe so, maybe not – in any event, the *lingua franca* will continue to be English. So we have the historically odd situation that regional power and prestige do *not* imply the necessity for others to know that region’s language(s). English receives further injections of life – first from America and then from a wider world which it has already penetrated. Robert Burchfield, former editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and consultant to the 1980s television series *The Story of English*, made the point that English dominance seems assured, well into the future, unless something truly cataclysmic – a nuclear “winter”, for instance – were to occur. Well, in that case, all prior bets would be off, anyway, and it is interesting that only such an extreme event would suggest itself as appropriate in the discussion of possible limitations to the spread and importance of English.

The power of English is enhanced by its relative “openness”, as mentioned above. The reasons for this are not fully transparent, but they certainly lie entwined with other historical threads. There exist, today, a strength and practicality about English which make a relaxed stance easy; that is, a secure and powerful medium need not worry very much about borrowings and hybrids, about localisation and colloquialism, about purism and prescriptivism. But even if we go back to periods in which English was not dominant, back (say) to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when “standard” national languages were beginning to emerge in Europe, we find English linguistic reflexes to be unlike those elsewhere. The most notable example is the lack of a language academy – to help standardise, yes, but usually also to protect, to keep out foreign influence, to manage neologisms, and so on.

Some years ago, Randolph Quirk pointed to an “Anglo-Saxon” aversion to “linguistic engineering”, a disdain for language academies and their purposes – goals which, he felt, were “fundamentally alien” to English speakers’ conceptions of language.⁵ This is putting things too strongly, perhaps, but it is certainly noteworthy that the United Kingdom and the United States are virtually the only countries not to have (or have had) formal bodies charged with maintaining linguistic standards. It is also interesting to consider that – given the obvious need for standardisation, even in English – both countries essentially appointed one-man academies; the great lexicographers, Samuel Johnson and Noah Webster, produced dictionaries that became the arbiters of standards and of “correctness”.

One aspect of English “openness”, and another indication of its strength, can be found in the degree of its localisation around the world, and – more importantly, perhaps – the attitudes attaching to this localisation. Consider the recent history of English compared with French, in this regard. The latter has seen its influence shrink dramatically, and it is unsurprising that the current stance is often one of protection and defence. Part of this involves a renewed vigour – for the basic tendency was always there – in what might be called linguistic centralism. French is certainly interested in expansion – in bringing Rivarol’s language of clarity to more people – but this is to be accomplished in a guarded and centralist way. English, on the other hand, is much more decentralised, less guarded

and more expansive. Local varieties achieve considerable status – Indian English provides perhaps the single best example of a developing and accepted indigenised model – and, indeed, some predict an increasing divergence, reminiscent of the birth of the Romance languages; it must be noted, however, that there are strong counter-tendencies to this.

In any event, a language once tainted by imperialism is rapidly becoming one of “our” languages in many parts of the world. It is suggestive that we see books devoted to the “new Englishes”, that there are journals called *World Englishes* and *English World-Wide*, and that these have essentially no equivalents in French scholarly circles.⁶

The current world status of English is not an unprecedented phenomenon, nor is it likely to be the last word in global linguistic dominance. On the other hand, political, historical, commercial and technological features have combined to produce a world language that is stronger and more ubiquitous than any of its predecessors. World languages are no respecters of borders, and the case of Irish is often cited here: as mentioned, it is the only Celtic language to have its own country, but that has not made it the most powerful in its family, nor has it managed to bar foreign linguistic influence at the customs-post. Irish is, of course, a minority language, and its subordinate role predates considerably the establishment of the Republic.

English, however, also poses threats to more substantial rivals. In 1999, the *Nederlandse Taalunie* sponsored a meeting in Brussels devoted to the status and use of “national” European languages. The real thrust of the conference was the place of smaller varieties – Dutch, Finnish, Swedish and others – in a Europe increasingly dominated by French, German and, above all, English. About seventy participants from all over the continent (and beyond) provided more evidence than any rational observer could possibly need that being a “state” variety rather than a “stateless” one can mean very little in the world today.⁷

It is obvious that even “big” languages worry about English – examples need hardly be given of English usages now common in France, in Japan, in Germany. It is worth noting, though, that these usages do not simply fill new needs, or avoid translations for words in common international exchange; they can also push aside already-existing equivalents. It is one

thing, then, to refer to *das Web-Design* or *der Cursor*, and perhaps another to employ *der Trend*, or *der Team* or *der Cash-Flow*. Languages can fight back, of course. The Association for the German Language recently named the rector of Universität München as *Sprachpanscher*, for proposing the replacement of *Abteilung* and *Fachbereich* with “department”. The association also touched upon the broader theme implied above, when rejecting English (or quasi-English) terms in cyberspace – *chatten* (computer talk) and *downloaden*, for instance. In fact, almost all “foreign” languages – from German to Inuktitut – are subject to English pressures in the global internet society.⁸

External pressures often lead to internal division. “E-mail” is commonly used in French, for example, even though the *Académie française* has endorsed *message électronique* (or *mél*, an abbreviated version), and Quebec’s *Office de la langue française* has plumped for *courriel*. It is not very surprising, either, that, within the wider language community, the more threatened sectors will tend to be the most linguistically watchful. Canada’s sovereigntist *Parti Québécois* recently accused France of not being French enough, of not sufficiently guarding the barriers, when it was announced that Air France pilots would now speak English to air-traffic controllers in Paris. This is in line with international practice, which makes English the norm in aviation – but French has been allowed in Quebec airspace for twenty years, and its place there has become of considerable symbolic importance. French pilots may inform ground control that they are about to commence *le fuel dumping*, but their *Québécois* counterparts are more likely to refer to *délestage*.

All of this suggests that there now exists a division in the ranks of “big” languages: English is the sole occupant of one category, while French, German, Spanish, Russian and other languages jostle amongst themselves in the second.⁹

Learning languages in North America and in Britain

It has recently been pointed out – yet again – that the English are far behind their continental counterparts in foreign-language competence. Worse, many monolingual anglophones reject the benefits of diversity *per se*, convinced that a linguistically uniform world would be

more efficient and harmonious. At the same time, a new Eurobarometer survey released to coincide with the “European Year of Languages” (2001) showed that 70% of Europeans may agree that everyone now needs English, but they also think that at least one additional language should be the norm – and it is now linguistic diversity, not monolingualism, that is seen to underpin global harmony.¹⁰

It has always been more difficult to teach and to learn foreign languages in North America than in Europe. Within Europe, the difficulties have – in recent times, at least – been greater in Britain than on the continent. Do we observe here some genetic anglophone linguistic deficiency? Are the British and the Americans right when they say, “I’m just no good at foreign languages”? Are they right to envy those clever Europeans (or, indeed, Africans and Asians) who slide effortlessly from one mode to another? The answers here obviously involve environmental conditions, not genetic ones, but I present these rather silly notions because – to the extent to which they are believed, or half-believed, or inarticulately felt – they constitute a type of self-fulfilling prophecy which adds to the difficulty of language learning. I use the word *adds* here because the real difficulties, the important contextual conditions, the soil in which such prophecies flourish, have to do with power and dominance. Anglophone linguistic laments perhaps involve some crocodile tears or, at least, can seem rather hollow: the regrets of those who lack competence, but who need not, after all, really bother to acquire it.

Given what I’ve said earlier – about the status of English in Florio’s time, for instance – we could assume that English speakers, when not globally dominant, were actually assiduous language learners. This is a view endorsed by Norman Davies in his recent popular history: before the twentieth century, the idea that the British were somehow innately ill-equipped to speak foreign languages would have seemed ludicrous, and most educated people (not just the royals, not just Victoria and Albert chatting away in German) were, in fact, bilingual or better. (Less well-educated people, of course, formed another category. And, with the great nineteenth-century expansion of continental travel, many such individuals were for the first time able to go abroad. In one of his famous travel guides, John Murray discussed the misunderstood Englishman, whose “morose sullenness” is generally due to the “involuntary silence arising from his

ignorance of foreign languages ... which prevents his enjoying society.”¹¹)

On the other hand, there are counter-indications, and one of these takes us back exactly to Florio’s day. In *The Merchant of Venice* (I:ii), Portia complains (of Falconbridge, one of her suitors) that “he understands not me, nor I him: he hath neither Latin, French, nor Italian.” All her admirers, including a Scot, are criticised, “but only the English one is slated for linguistic incompetence.”¹²

Well, we need not take Shakespeare as an infallible guide to language abilities here but, in any event, there is no real paradox. Educated English speakers were, at once, more broadly capable in foreign languages than they are now, and increasingly less capable – because of the growing clout of their maternal variety – than their continental colleagues. A related and relevant point is that, as we approach the modern era, we find that linguistic competence becomes more and more associated with formal educational instruction, and less driven by mundane necessity. Of course, this is a very general statement, and there are all sorts of exceptions to it. Nonetheless, the correlation between the social, political and economic dominance of the English-speaking world and the decline in its foreign-language competence – for those obvious reasons already touched upon – mean that language learning becomes more a matter of the classroom than of the street. And this has clear implications for both students and teachers.

These implications are, if anything, rather more pointed in North America than they are in Britain (or should I say England?), and they rest upon an interesting point – one, indeed, which enables us to see the generalisations possible from the American example. It is commonly accepted that favourable attitudes and positive motivations are central to successful second-language learning. There is, indeed, a very large literature on this theme.¹³ The importance of favourable attitudes, however, *varies inversely with real linguistic necessity*. Historically, most changes in language-use patterns owe much more to socioeconomic and political pressures than they do to attitudes. Some have suggested, however, that one sort of motivation may play a part here. A mid-nineteenth-century Irishman, for instance, could well have loathed English and what it represented, while still realising the mundane necessity to change.

This *instrumental* motivation is, of course, a

grudging quantity, and quite unlike what has been termed an *integrative* one – i.e., one based upon genuine interest in another group and its language, perhaps involving a desire to move towards that group in some sense. There might also be a useful distinction to be drawn here between *favourable* and *positive* attitudes (to cite the adjectives I used above). To stay with the Irish example, one could say that the language attitudes towards English were typically instrumental – and positive, in the sense of commitment or emphasis – but not necessarily integrative or favourable. Of course, attempting to separate instrumentality from “integrativeness” may prove, in practice, to be difficult and, as well, the relationship between the two no doubt alters over the course of language shift. But there is a distinction between, say, the English needed by Japanese engineers and that sought by Japanese professors of American literature; the difference is one of depth of fluency, to be sure, but it goes beyond that.¹⁴

Similarly, the language teaching of most interest here is something that goes beyond language training – although it must build upon that, and although some students are primarily interested in acquiring what we could now call an instrumental fluency. It has been argued that, since attitudes (favourable ones, at least) are often of little consequence in real-life situations of language contact and shift, they are trivial elsewhere, too. My point is simply that attitudes may assume greater importance in many teaching settings: if the context is *not* perceived to be very pertinent in any immediate or personal way, if the participant is *not* there out of real, mundane necessity, then attitudes may make a real difference. In this way – leaving ability out of the equation, of course – language classes may become just like all others.

This does not always sit very well with teachers, most of whom are concerned to tell the students how *different* language classes are from many of the others. Language learning is not an end in itself – like history, or botany, or political science – but rather the acquisition of the key needed to enter another literature, another culture. The distinction is not, of course, absolute: on the one hand, it is possible to learn another language for its own sake; on the other, meaningful work in all disciplines requires the acquisition of specialised tools – some sort of apprenticeship is involved. But there is certainly a difference of degree, if nothing else, and this is clearly seen when the work

of those in modern-language departments is compared to that of their colleagues elsewhere in the academy.

At other times, and in other settings, instrumental motivations could be taken for granted. The inequalities in power and prestige that have usually given birth to these motivations typically reinforce broader and more “integrative” tendencies, as well. The commercial necessity which once led to Italian existed because of the superior position of Italian commerce, but this was inexorably linked to an attractive dominance in other spheres. Mundane motivation may well have become, then, something less restricted. Beyond all this there was, until quite recently, a virtually unquestioned acceptance of the view that education involved languages. The matter of “instrumentality”, as commonly understood, hardly arose. An educated person knew some literature, some history, some geography – and acquired some level of foreign-language competence. Languages were simply part of the marrow of learning.

However, in a society that rewards narrow and immediately-applicable learning, in educational systems that are increasingly “corporatized”, in the thousand-channel universe that confuses information with knowledge, and in a world made more and more safe for anglophones, language learning and all its ramifications lose immediacy. Not only does instrumental appeal lessen, but the more intangible and more profound attractions – to which instrumentality leads and with which it is entwined – inevitably decline.

Broadly speaking, there are two paths through the woods, although occasionally they share the same ground. The first is for foreign-language teaching to satisfy itself with that shrinking pool of students intrinsically interested in languages and their cultures. These *are*, after all, the students nearest to one’s own intellectual heart. The problem is that the “natural” constituency here might prove too small to support a discipline at desired levels, and it is hard to nurture in any direct way. The other is to hope and work for a renewed instrumental interest, with whatever longer-term fallout that might lead to. To some extent, this is dependent upon a context which extends well beyond national borders, upon alterations in global linguistic circumstance which, while inevitable, are not always easy to predict. On the other hand, things might be done at home – particularly when home is a culturally diverse

setting, in which the loss of a hundred native languages to English is seen as uneconomic, in which the rights of immigrants – particularly those who are entitled to vote – attract social and political attention, and so on. If we think here of the American scene, for example, we inevitably consider Spanish.

The study of Spanish is self-evidently important. It is a language with a lengthy cultural and literary tradition – with many interesting branches to the original trunk – and, at the same time, it remains a widely used variety around the world. With something like 300 million speakers, it runs fourth (behind Hindi-Urdu, Chinese and English) in the usage sweepstakes. Academically, then, it is the ideal second language. More immediately, recent reports show that there are over 30 million people of Hispanic background in the United States (about 12% of the population), that this group is the fastest-growing minority, and that – in fifty years’ time – its proportions will double, and one in four Americans will have this ethnic origin. (These are informed speculations, of course, and there is room for variation: Carlos Fuentes recently said that, by 2050, three out of every five Americans will speak Spanish.) The figures, impressive as they are on their own, take on more weight when we consider their traditionally concentrated nature: millions of people living more or less together are a different sociological phenomenon than if they are widely scattered among others. At the same time, not all Hispanic people live in the southwest or the southeast. In the last ten years their numbers have more than doubled in Iowa (to take one example), and they are now more numerous than black Americans there. All in all, a powerful and growing population.¹⁵

Considering both the global and the national presence of Spanish, it is little wonder that the language is the linchpin of modern-language teaching in the United States. The whole area, however, remains weak: even though recent (1998) MLA statistics suggest an overall increase of about 5% in foreign-language enrolments since 1995, only 1.2 million college students are represented here, fewer than 8% of the total. There have been, indeed, steep declines in some quarters; enrolments in German were reportedly down by 7.5% (90,000 students altogether), and those in French decreased by 3% (to about 200,000). But for Spanish, the figures are better: enrolments are

up by about 8%, which translates to some 660,000 students. And to complete this part of the circle, one can see that students of Spanish thus constitute 55% of *all* language students. Is Spanish learning in a healthy situation, then, or does it only seem so in comparison with weaker sisters?¹⁶

This may be an impossible question to answer. How many students *ought* to be studying Spanish – or archaeology, or quantum mechanics, or sculpture? Still, one might expect that language study would be more immediately related to extra-educational factors – jobs, mobility, opportunity, and so on – and, if that is so, then one might wonder why the strength of the American Hispanic community does not bolster the educational effort more.

In fact, despite America's multiethnic status in general, and its powerful Hispanic components more specifically, the country remains resolutely anglophone in all important domains and, indeed, the chief supporter – as we have already seen – of English as a global language. Historically, the melting-pot has been most effective at the level of language – that is, while aspects of cultural continuity can be discerned in various groups, languages other than English typically last no longer than the second or third generation, and the “normal” pattern has meant moving from one monolingualism to another. This is true, even for the two “special” cases, francophones in New England and hispanophones in the southwest – special, inasmuch as they, unlike all other arrivals, remain close to their heartlands, the borders of which are easily and frequently crossed. The *timing* of language shift is naturally dependent upon such variables, but the overall shape of the curve is remarkably similar across groups.

All of this makes Carlos Fuentes' remarks rather naïve – even though they are eminently understandable, reflective of the views of many and, indeed, attractive in their impulse. He asks why most Americans know only English and sees their monolingualism as a “great paradox”: the United States is at once the supreme and the most isolated world power. Why, he continues, does America “want to be a monolingual country?” All twenty-first-century Americans ought to know more than one language, to better understand the world and deal with problems. And so on, and so on. Obviously, monolingualism is not a paradox, and to say that Americans “want” to be monolingual would seem to miss the point – it is simply that

English serves across domains.¹⁷

In more subtle ways, though, it could be argued that Americans do “want” to be monolingual – or, to put it more aptly, see no reason to expand their repertoires. They therefore resist the institutionalisation of other languages. In a climate like this, especially a long-standing one, such an outlook – arguably based on perceived practicality – can expand on less immediate and more unpleasant levels. Not only do languages other than English appear unnecessary, their use can be seen as downright un-American, their speakers as unwilling to throw themselves wholeheartedly into that wonderful pot, their continuing linkage to other cultures a suspect commodity. It is surely not surprising that, given the right context, these sorts of views would find formal expression, that organisations like *U.S. English* would flourish, that many states would enact English-only legislation, that bilingual education would be progressively de-emphasised and, in one or two notorious cases, scrapped entirely. Nor is it surprising that the central part of that “right context” would be an increasingly worried sense that the non-anglophone “others” are becoming too potent. English-only, therefore, typically means not-Spanish. And so another circle is completed: the very language community which, by its power and numbers, ought logically to blaze the way in foreign-language teaching and learning, is under attack by powerful bodies which are either nostalgia-ridden yearners for some selective status quo or, worse, carriers of the most abhorrent social virus. And, even if these bodies were absent from the political landscape, one could only expect from the general public – at best – a lukewarm and uninformed stance.

There are one or two final notes to be made about Spanish (and other varieties) here, and they can reintroduce an expanded geographical scope. There is, for instance, something of a boom in Spanish at the moment, fuelled largely – it is argued – by popular culture and its current musical icons (Joaquín Cortés, Jennifer Lopez, Ricky Martin *et al.*). In western Canada – hardly the most fertile ground for language learning – Spanish university enrolments are up, often at the expense of French. In Toronto, the Spanish Centre has doubled its registrations in five years. Even in Québec, the trend to Spanish has strengthened, and the new leader (as of 8 March 2001) of the separatist *Parti Québécois*, Bernard Landry, is fluent in the language and

keen on extending relations with South America. At the same time, Canadian university language departments are under pressure: the Slavic languages are particularly vulnerable, and Italian and German are in decline. French departments are not immune, either, which is of course particularly noteworthy in Canada.

Administrators point to the downward spiral in which declining enrolment and reduced teaching staff become intertwined. While a recent survey (April 2001) revealed that many Canadians endorse linguistic diversity (the enquiry was undertaken by an “interested” body: Canadian Parents for French), the number of university students “majoring” in languages and literatures other than French or English declined from a peak of 3,800 (in 1995) to 3,100 (1998). Furthermore, studies show that – in both Canada and the United States (and no doubt in Britain, too) – more and more university time has to be given to quite basic language-acquisition skills. Thus, foreign-language departments lament not only declining numbers but also the *sort* of work they have to do. Relatedly, the traditional mix of language, literature and culture becomes a harder and more inappropriate sell, and is replaced by “engineering German” or “business Italian”.

The increased allure of Spanish is evident in Britain, too. While overall statistics show a drop in entrants to modern-language degree courses from about 4,400 (1996) to 3,700 (1999), it remains relatively strong compared to German, Russian and other languages – whose university departments are shrinking or, sometimes, on their way to closure. Language teachers are naturally eager to capitalise on the interest in Spanish and, more generally, on the form of that interest – a broadened cultural context stressing, perhaps, the civilisation behind the songs of Martin and Lopez. In Southampton, Mike Kelly endorses the linking of language to contemporary social culture, film studies, and so on; he has also emphasised another, and often related, thrust: the modular approach (mentioned above) which would teach French for lawyers or Spanish for chemists. There are other voices, of course, that lament the decline of literature-based instruction, that hear with apprehension Kelly’s argument that “universities are marketed, involved in designing attractive courses that lure students.” There may indeed be a slide here from the substantial to the superficial (and possibly quite ephemeral) – and there

may be also a hint of desperation, akin perhaps to trendy church services offered to dwindling congregations.¹⁸

Conclusion

No home remedies are suggested in this piece, which has aimed more simply at some elucidation of the social context relevant to languages and language learning. Large forces and weighty histories are at work here, and their presence should be acknowledged and thought about. This is not a jeremiad, although I know that, for many, English is a lowering villain depriving other mediums of their rightful inheritance. I would simply reiterate that the factors at work here are neither unfamiliar nor unpredictable. We have seen transitional linguistic and social times before – and transition is, almost by definition, a painful and wrenching experience for those whose lives are directly affected.

It is a truism to say that the teaching and learning of languages is influenced by the state of affairs outside the walls of the academy. It would be heartening – in a world in which, for all the power of English, bilingual or multilingual competences are still the norm – if the North American (or the British) academy were dealing with a constituency which acknowledged and accepted such repertoires. The products on offer would not then require such advertising; the demand would arise naturally and would not itself have first to be suggested to the consumers. But this is a setting in which some linguistic analogy of Gresham’s Law seems to operate. As well, one recalls the (perhaps apocryphal) remark of that school superintendent in Arkansas who steadfastly refused to have foreign languages taught at secondary level: “If English was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for you.”¹⁹

We should recall, though, that linguistic and cultural diversity continues to be a visible and powerful quantity in many settings – America and Britain among them. We have also engaged, over the last few years, in an unprecedented debate about multiculturalism and pluralism, about identity and citizenship. The field here remains terribly disputed and highly politicised – but the debate is far from over, and the valuable middle ground has yet to be charted. The most active participants in the discussion have typically *not* been those whose primary concerns are linguistic, and this

is regrettable. They have an important contribution to make to the broader social debate, one dominated by political scientists, sociologists and philosophers. In addition, in their own more particular settings, they should realise that the stock-taking which uncertain times and unfavourable conditions force upon reflective people – and no bad thing, too – need not occur solely in the passive voice. ■

Notes and references

- 1 See “England: National language thrust”, an entry in the current-events columns of the *Modern Language Journal*, 2000, 84(3), 429.
- 2 See Frances Yates, *John Florio* (Cambridge: University Press, 1934) and Arthur Acheson, *Shakespeare's Lost Years in London, 1586–1592* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1920).
- 3 John Edwards, *Multilingualism* (London: Penguin, 1995) and *Language, Society and Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).
- 4 Page 27 in Eugene Eoyang, “The worldliness of the English language: A lingua franca past and future” (*ADFL Bulletin*, 1999, 31(1), 26–32).
- 5 Randolph Quirk, *Style and Communication in the English Language* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982).
- 6 On academies, dictionaries, Rivarol and journals devoted to “Englishes”, see Edwards (note 3). A useful overview has just been provided by Tom McArthur, “World English and world Englishes: Trends, tensions, varieties and standards” (*Language Teaching*, 2001, 34, 1–20).
- 7 *Institutional Status and Use of National Languages in Europe* was the conference held under the auspices of the Nederlandse Taalunie (The Dutch Language Union), Brussels, March 1999. The subject is an extremely timely one in a Europe which is, on the one hand, coming more and more together and, on the other, trying to accommodate the smaller groups within the federation. Thus, the University of Vienna and the Research Centre on Multilingualism (Brussels) sponsored a symposium on *Minorities in European Linguistic and Cultural Policies* (Vienna, November 1999). And, in January 2000, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science sponsored a meeting in Oegstgeest on *Comparative Perspectives on Regional and Immigrant Minority Languages in Multicultural Europe* (organised by the European Cultural Foundation, Tilburg University and the Fryske Akademy).
- 8 See Jennie Brookman, “Germans fight anglo invasion” (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 24 September 2000); Wayne Kondro, “Welcome to the dead language society” (*Globe & Mail* [Toronto], 24 July 2000); Stephanie Nolen, “Can the Inuit keep their voice?” (*Globe & Mail*, 25 July 2000).
- 9 For recent French and German developments, see

Rhéal Séguin, “France not French enough, PQ says”, and “Reverse role model made in Canada” (*Globe & Mail*, 29 March and 1 April, 2000); Alan Freeman, “The English patience of France” (*Globe & Mail*, 1 April 2000); Lysiane Gagnon, “Back in the trenches of the language war” (*Globe & Mail*, 3 April 2000); Elisabeth Ribbans, “Germans bemoan popularity of English” (*Globe & Mail*, 27 April 2000). See also John Edwards, “Language and the future: Choices and constraints” (Paper presented at the conference on *Language in the Twenty-First Century*, Whitney Center, Yale University, June 1999).

10 See Clare Mar-Molinero, “English ties too many tongues” and Michael de Laine, “Diversity or lingua franca for Europe?” (both in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 23 February 2001). See also Lid King, “The European Year of Languages” (*Language Teaching*, 2001, 34, 21–29).

11 Murray's remarks are found on page 24 of Alan Sillitoe's delightful *Leading the Blind: A Century of Guide Book Travel 1815–1914* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

12 Nick Oulton, in a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 March 2000, provides the Shakespearean example here – noting that perhaps the pre-twentieth-century competence attributed by Davies (in his *The Isles: A History*. London: Macmillan, 1999) to the “British” might exclude the English!

13 See Edwards (note 3) and Kimberly Noels & Richard Clément, “Language in education” (In J. Edwards (ed.), *Language in Canada*. Cambridge: University Press, 1998. Pp. 102–124).

14 See Edwards (note 3).

15 See the report by Becky Bohrer of the Associated Press, “U.S. Hispanic population the fastest-growing group” (*Globe & Mail*, 13 May 2000). See also Carlos Fuentes, “A cure for monolingualism” (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 17 December 1999).

16 See recent editorials in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 17 December 1999, commenting upon the meetings of the Modern Language Association – for example, “German: Fewer than 100 jobs”, and “Literature moves to a new Latin rhythm”.

17 See Fuentes (note 15).

18 See the “Latin rhythm” piece referred to in note 16 and Kondro, note 8. See also Clare Mar-Molinero, “Latino lingo is the ploy to win Spanish eyes” (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 10 November 2000); the editorial on “Innovative language teaching” (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 9 June 2000); Leah Hendry, “Want to be bilingual? Try Spanish” (*Globe & Mail*, 22 June 2000); Léo Charbonneau, “Tongue-tied” (*University Affairs*, March 2001). For further details on GCSE and A-level foreign-language entries, see King (note 10).

19 Page xvii in Christopher Ricks & Leonard Michaels, *The State of the Language* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990).