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Abstract

Amidst growing academic and popular interest in concepts of social justice, a small but growing literature has emerged discussing the concept of 'linguistic justice'. However, this literature has only given very limited consideration to the issue of language endangerment. This article aims to advance a theory of linguistic (in)justice that can assist in understanding and resisting language endangerment. Central to such a theory is an understanding of the role that choice plays in the processes of language shift that drive language endangerment; unjust language shift is always coerced. Drawing on the work of political philosopher Nancy Fraser, I argue that this coercion is brought about by the unequal distribution of material resources and the existence of status hierarchies between social groups and languages. I examine how both unequal distribution and misrecognition have historically been produced by colonialism, resulting in the contemporary crisis of global language endangerment. I therefore argue that decolonization represents a necessary condition for linguistic justice, and describe how decolonization can be achieved by transforming relations of redistribution and recognition. In concluding, I advocate for ongoing dialogue between disciplines, and between academics and communities, to advance theories of decolonization and linguistic justice.

Introduction

Recent years have seen the emergence of a growing literature around the topic of 'linguistic justice' (van Parijjs, 2011; Mowbray, 2012; Piller, 2016; Avineri, Graham, Johnson, Riner, & Rosa, 2019; Reagan 2019). Although these authors approach the topic from a variety of disciplines, and from divergent philosophical and political positions, the literature is united by a common desire to imagine what linguistic justice is and how it might be achieved.

At the same time as this literature on linguistic justice has appeared, we have also seen the spread of justice frameworks to other topics, and the emergence of multiple justice literatures, on topics such as global justice (Armstrong, 2019), environmental justice (Walker, 2012), spatial justice (Soja, 2010), reproductive justice (Ross & Solinger, 2017), disability justice (Puar, 2017), and so on. This growth in justice literatures, meanwhile, has paralleled developments outside of academia, which have seen social justice emerge as a key term in numerous public discourses.

My aim here is to pick up on some of these developments and apply them to what I see as the most singular linguistic fact of our times: the impending loss of at least half the world's languages.

To give a brief summary of my argument, I think that we can conceptualize the relationship between language endangerment and justice as follows. Language shift that takes place under conditions of coercion is unjust, and most language shift taking place around the world today can be considered unjust in this way. The

coercion that lies behind processes of language shift results from the uneven distribution of resources and respect that have emerged in the last half millennium of global colonialism. Undoing this injustice and creating conditions where linguistic choice can be made freely involves creating more equitable distributions of resources and respect. And since colonialism created these inequalities, linguistic justice must take the form of decolonization (Stebbins, Eira & Couzens, 2017; Leonard 2018). In the conclusion I demonstrate how linguists are already involved in decolonial work to redistribute resources and respect, and discuss how this work can be strengthened and built on to help pursue linguistic justice.

Language Shift & Choice

In an early effort to theorize linguistic justice in relation to endangered languages, political philosopher Michael Blake (2003) argues that not all language shift is unjust. In some cases, language loss may be chosen, or unforced, and in these cases, although the loss of language is tragic, it is not unjust. According to Blake, only language shift that occurs in conditions of discrimination, domination, humiliation and other forms of 'social evil' can be thought of as unjust. He also argues that the unjustness of language loss is not only tied to, but also amplifies, the group-differentiated social subordination that accompanies it. In Blake's argument, what separates just and unjust language loss is the issue of choice: whether the choice was coerced or free.

The anthropologist Joseph Errington (2003) makes a similar point in an article on language rights and language endangerment, when he claims that the rights outlined in the universal declaration of human rights enable us to distinguish between two different kinds of language loss. The first he calls ‘illegitimate language shift’ which he describes as “...the *causal* outcome of coercive forces external to a minority community” and distinguishes it from language shift “arising from cumulative, self-interested, knowledgeable choices by social agents between one language rather than another” (Errington 2003: 728). Again we see the distinction between free and coerced choice as the divider between just and unjust language shift.

So if both Errington and Blake concur that free choice defines just language shift, we should ask exactly what free choice looks like. The concept of ‘free, prior, and informed’ consent recommended in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, and used in UN agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, might offer a helpful model. This approach aims to secure the legitimacy of choice by ensuring that it is free from coercion (both the positive coercion of compelling people to make certain choices, and the negative coercion of penalizing some choices); that the choice is made prior to the process of change having begun; and that the choice is made with full knowledge of the possible consequences of that choice, and their likelihood. Let me give an example of a situation that approaches this in practice.

In a 2011 article, Anna-Riita Lindgren, Klaus Lindgren, and Mirja Sari describe how, in 19th century Finland, many Swedish-speakers, in solidarity with the growing movement of Finnish nationalism, undertook voluntary language shift to Finnish. The article focuses on analyzing the choices made by 13 families, and the options they had available to them. Their choice appears to have been largely free, with little coercion involved, either political or economic; the choice to use Swedish both at home and in public life, including school, remained, and was not penalized. The choice was informed—the families undertook the shift in order to express solidarity with the Finns and Finnish language, and knew the consequences. Finally, the choice was prior insofar as the families themselves independently initiated the shift rather than making a reactionary decision once the process had already begun. And although it is hard to imagine any conditions that approach a choice that is entirely free, prior, and informed, this situation does appear close to that.

We might briefly look at another example to give an idea of what free, prior, and informed consent looks like in the case of language shift. Donald Laycock, in a 1982 paper on linguistic diversity in Melanesia, attributed at least part of the linguistic diversity in the region to deliberate differentiation, creativity, and a preference for diversity. He provides examples of linguistic forms

that appear to be merely inversions of those found in neighboring languages, which seem to exist only in order to create barriers of intelligibility and social differentiation. In this case, if linguistic change and shift were driven by widely held cultural values that promote creativity and diversity, then these playful, deliberate acts of language differentiation seem to be a good candidate for *just* language shift.

If these examples set a sort of benchmark for what, uncoerced, ‘free, prior, and informed’ choice looks like in relation to language shift, it should be clear the vast majority of language shift taking place in the world today does not take place under such conditions. Rather, it takes place under conditions of coercion. In order to explore the relationship between this coercion and concepts of justice, I will draw on the work of Nancy Fraser (1998, 2000, 2003), and her distinction between recognitive and redistributive justice.

Injustice: Distribution & Recognition

Within Nancy Fraser’s framework, injustice produces coercion. Coercion does not necessarily come about as one person or group acting against or over another; it is not necessarily an act, nor is it necessarily an explicit stance, or an expressed will to dominate. Rather, coercion comes about through structural arrangements. Coercion is present in the fabric of society, in economic systems and relations, in legal and political arrangements, and so on. Nobody need *intend* to coerce someone, nor is it necessary that someone *feel* they have been coerced. Rather, coercion happens when structural arrangements differentially distribute the capacity to make decisions freely. Nancy Fraser describes these structural arrangements in terms of two key concepts: distribution and recognition.

Distributive injustice is the maldistribution of material resources that underlie not just class distinctions, and other forms of group differentiated disparities in income within states, but also the gap between poor and rich countries (Armstrong, 2019). Globally, a large extent of these disparities originates in European colonialism, and the way that it enriched Europe at the expense of the rest of the world through a process of primitive accumulation (Rodney, 2018). In settler colonial contexts like Australia, an important aspect of the historical production of contemporary material inequalities has been the theft of land and the denial of a productive economic base to Indigenous peoples (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). The deprivation and exploitation visited upon African slaves is perhaps the most extreme version of distributive injustice, and demonstrates how the material deprivation of some populations is used to enrich others.

Distributive injustice produces coercion. Wherever material inequalities exist, people can be compelled by their own needs, or by the desires of people more powerful than them, to do things that they would not

otherwise do. Globally, these kinds of material inequalities are an important part of language endangerment. People, families, and communities shift language in order to improve their economic standing and life chances. In such cases, they are not reacting to the greater availability of opportunities in another language. Rather, they are responding to the lack of opportunities in their own. We therefore observe that language shift typically occurs from languages of poverty to languages of security and prosperity. Thus, coercion operates wherever material inequalities, and hence distributive injustice, exist.

Beyond distributive injustice between groups of people, we also need to consider redistributive justice as it relates directly to languages. Languages need material resources to thrive. They need investments of people's time, as well as money, to enable corpus planning, status planning, and acquisition planning; to allow domain expansion, including into digital domains; to create teaching materials, to foment literary production, and so on. The inequality between the resources available to language such as English, Arabic, or Modern Standard Mandarin, and those available to most of the world's Indigenous languages, produces a linguistic GINI index that would resemble the world's most extreme economic inequalities. Following Ayo Bamgbose (1993), we might therefore think of these under-resourced languages as 'deprived' languages, insofar as they have been denied the resources they need to flourish, leading to a situation of language endangerment and loss 'by attrition'.¹

The second element of justice in Nancy Fraser's model of social justice is recognition. Recognition here refers to the perceived non-material value associated with particular social groups and their members. The maldistribution of recognition underlies most forms of oppression: racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, ableism, and so on. It is a fundamental denial of equality between different social groups, and can manifest as a refusal to acknowledge the existence of certain groups (nonrecognition) or to acknowledge fundamental equality between groups (misrecognition), and manifests as a variety of harms, "including stigmatization and physical assault; cultural devaluation, social exclusion, and political marginalization; harassment and disparagement in everyday life; and denial of the full rights and equal protections of citizenship" (Fraser, 2003:23).

The misrecognition of particular social groups has historically been associated with the maldistribution of resources. Indigenous peoples have been rendered available for murder and dispossession by assumptions of their cultural inferiority and inherent savagery, whilst the dehumanization of Africans rendered them available

for slavery. Both dispossession and slavery were predicated on the explicit misrecognition of particular groups. Such misrecognition, then, acts as a form of coercion when people are incentivized to leave a disesteemed social group by whatever means possible, including at the cost of practices and identities they value deeply.

The issue of recognitive injustice also applies directly to languages. In addition to disesteeming social groups, languages themselves are disesteemed. They may be described as ugly, meaningless, noisy, and demoted to the status of sound (non-language); they may be denied full status of a language and demoted to a 'mere' dialect; they may be deemed illogical, unwieldy, or unsuitable for particular purposes; they may be targeted indirectly when multilingual individuals and groups are targeted for speaking 'with an accent', or for code-switching; and they may be blamed for their material deprivation and its consequences when they are described as unable to function in modern society, or as having limited domains of use. People may therefore 'choose' to shift from these languages in order to escape the constant status subordination they face whenever they open their mouth.

Towards Justice

Seeking justice involves undoing injustice in terms of distribution and recognition: moving from maldistribution to more equitable distribution, and from nonrecognition and misrecognition to recognition.

Addressing distributive injustice aims to create distributive justice. This would include more evenly distributed wealth between countries, various social groups, and individuals, which would not only remove economic incentives for language shift, but also reduce the capacity of certain social groups to exert dominance over others. Redistributive justice would also include economic interventions that address the ways in which economic inequalities have been historically produced and continue to be maintained today. Redistributive justice would therefore include recognizing the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and reverting control of their lands to them, and also reparations for the various harms of colonialism, including slavery. It would also entail creating material equality between languages, to ameliorate language loss by attrition. Such redistributive justice would not necessarily require that all languages receive exactly the same material support, but only that every language receives sufficient support to meet its needs.

Addressing recognitive injustice and seeking just recognition, meanwhile, involves addressing nonrecognition and misrecognition. Recognitive justice seeks, in the words of Nancy Fraser (2003:30) "to establish the subordinated party as a full partner in social life, able to interact with others as a peer. ...to *deinstitutionalize patterns of cultural value that impede*

¹ I am here drawing on Totten's (2012) concept of 'genocide by attrition'.

parity of participation and to replace them with patterns that foster it" (emphasis in the original). Fraser describes two ways in which this can be achieved: affirmative and transformative strategies. Affirmative strategies seek to valorize disesteemed social groups, and are seen in various pride movements, such as the mental health movement 'mad pride' (Burstow, 2019) and the disability movement 'crip pride' (Sandahl, 2003), as well as movements to valorize disrespected languages (Hill, 2002). Fraser contrasts these with 'transformative' strategies which, rather than equalizing the status of different social groups, seek to remove distinctions between them altogether, and as an example of this she contrasts 'gay pride'—which seeks to "enhance the standing of an existing sexual orientation"—with queer politics, which aims to "destabilize the current grid of mutually exclusive sexual statuses" (Fraser, 2003:75).

Decolonization as Justice

If colonialism creates conditions of linguistic injustice by manufacturing maldistribution and harmful patterns of recognition, then decolonization is essential to seeking linguistic justice and addressing global language endangerment. But what is decolonization?

At its broadest, we can think of decolonization as the sum total of changes needed to undo the redistributive and recognitive harms of colonialism. We can broadly think of these changes as being of three types: epistemic, social, and political. Epistemic decolonization involves unlearning the worldview built by colonialism (Stebbins, Eira & Couzens, 2017), and creating systems of knowledge production that are open to Indigenous ways of thinking (Smith, 2013), thus creating not only epistemic equality, but also dismantling colonial knowledge systems and the harmful recognition they impose on dominated peoples and their languages. Social decolonization, in turn, involves reformulating social relations around more equitable recognition. This involves not only the affirmative strategies outlined above, but also practices by mainstream populations to reflect on, acknowledge, and dismantle their privilege. For linguists and others working with endangered languages, this means a willingness to prioritize "the aspirations and priorities of specific language communities or their representatives" (Stebbins, Eira & Couzens, 2017). Political decolonization, meanwhile, entails dismantling the harmful institutions that structure and perpetuate maldistribution and harmful recognition, and establishing institutional arrangements that address historical wrongs and restore sovereignty, self-determination, and dignity to Indigenous and other colonized peoples (Rammath, 2019).

In thinking about decolonization and justice, we might consider decolonization as a form of 'transitional justice' writ large. The International Centre for

Transitional Justice defines transitional justice as "the ways countries emerging from periods of conflict and repression address large-scale or systematic human rights violations."² Mechanisms for achieving transitional justice include prosecutions and trials, truth commissions, reparations, memorializations, and apologies, amongst others (Newman, 2019). The literature on transitional justice may therefore provide useful insights into how decolonization can be pursued as a foundation for pursuing linguistic justice.

However, any such investigation of the relationship between transitional justice and language revitalization would need to acknowledge that, like other political processes that aim to reformulate patterns and structures of recognition, transitional justice needs to be implemented in such a way that it transforms or dismantles, rather than reproducing, the hierarchies that produced the injustice in the first place (McBride 2017). For example, several scholars have examined how practices of affirmative recognition that have aimed to uplift Indigenous people, such as multiculturalism (Coulthard, 2014) and native title (Vincent, 2017), have perpetuated colonial violence. We therefore see divergent viewpoints both for (Rouhana, 2018) and against (Matsunaga, 2016) thinking about a meaningful relationship between decolonization and transitional justice.

Conclusion: Oppression, Charity & Justice

Above, I have outlined how language endangerment is produced by injustice, consisting of distributive and recognitive injustice, and how these injustices are produced by colonialism. Most language endangerment today can be considered unjust insofar as it is brought about by coercion resulting from structures of recognitive and distributive injustice. Therefore, I follow Alice Taff and her colleagues in eschewing the term language endangerment in favor of 'language oppression', which they define as "The enforcement of language loss by physical, mental, social and spiritual coercion..." (Taff, *et al* 2018: 863; Roche 2020). The 'most singular linguistic fact of our times' that I referred to in the introduction—the impending loss of at least half the world's languages—is a crisis of language oppression, global in scale.

Resisting language oppression requires us to seek justice through more equitable distribution of resources and respect. Many of us are already engaged in such practices. Whenever we undertake any sort of language revitalization, language maintenance, or language documentation project, we are realigning relations of distribution and recognition. We are often redistributing resources to under-resourced communities and languages, and bringing respect and recognition to

² <https://www.ictj.org/about/transitional-justice>

disesteemed social groups and their languages. Whether we intend to or not, whenever we implement such projects, we are thus working to undermine language oppression and advance linguistic justice.

However, we need to do this better. At present, our interventions resemble charity more than justice, insofar as they are matters of discretion rather than obligation (Armstrong, 2019), based on the good will of project designers, funders and implementers rather than the inalienable rights of the community. Furthermore, the impact of such projects will always be limited, since they leave underlying issues of structural inequality unaddressed. These forms of linguistic charity therefore need to be backed up by efforts to pursue linguistic justice through radical change—radical in the sense of reformulating basic structural arrangements of distribution and recognition (Gordon & Kinna, 2019). And since language oppression is a global phenomenon, produced by a system of global colonialism, these radical changes must also be global.

The response to this suggestion will inevitably be that seeking radical global change is impractical. I think a more appropriate reaction, however, is to examine the *necessity* of such change, rather than its *feasibility*, and to consider the consequences of our inaction. What will happen to the world's languages if we fail to achieve structural changes in current relations of distribution and recognition? Without radical change, language oppression will continue, no matter how many projects we undertake. The question we should be asking is therefore not *whether* we can create structural change, but *how*.

To assert that something is possible is not the same thing as saying that it is easy. Thinking through how to achieve such radical structural change and creating pathways to global linguistic justice will require what Lear (2008) calls 'imaginative excellence'. The most effective way to foster this imaginative excellence is through open dialogue between academic disciplines, and between academia and communities, based on good faith listening and commitment to a shared understanding of the inherent and inalienable value of each and every language. But to be effective, such dialogue needs to begin with the right question. And that question is: "How do we decolonize in order to achieve linguistic justice for everyone?"

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