

Cosmopolitan Anxieties and the Role of the State in Linguistic Hegemony

Peter Ives, Associate Professor

(Politics Department, University of Winnipeg, Canada;
p.ives@uwinnipeg.ca)

On February 16, 1918, in *Il Grido del Popolo*, Gramsci wrote an article that was the last of a series of his interventions concerning the proposition that the Socialist Party (PSI) promote the study of Esperanto. This article entitled, 'La Lingua Unica e l'Esperanto' [A Single Language and Esperanto], makes an important and very relevant distinction between *cosmopolitan* and *international* 'anxieties' concerning language. He writes,

The advocates of a single language are worried [preoccupano] by the fact that while the world contains a number of people who would like to communicate directly with one another, there is an endless number of different languages which restrict the ability to communicate. This is a *cosmopolitan*, not an *international* anxiety [preoccupazione], that of the bourgeois who travels for business or pleasure, of nomads more than of stable productive citizens. They [these advocates of Esperanto] would like artificially to create the *consequences* which as yet lack the necessary *conditions*, and since their activity is merely arbitrary, all they manage to do is waste the time and energy of those who take them seriously. (Gramsci 1985: 27).

William Boelhower, the translator of the English *Selections from Cultural Writings*, translates 'preoccupazione' as 'anxiety' where others may have selected a more literal 'preoccupation' or worry, as Boelhower actually does a few lines prior to this. While Gramsci does not use the closer Italian equivalent, 'ansia,' here, I think at least in English, 'anxiety' captures best what I am interested in and hopefully allows me to address our current 'anxieties' which have not 'pre-occupied' or even occupied much attention at all in the massive debates concerning 'globalization.' My larger goal is to read Gramsci in order to consider what I call our new 'questione della lingua' and others call 'global English' – the relations of which to global capitalism seem amazingly under-explored in the mountains of literature on globalization.

As Lo Piparo highlights, Gramsci's discussion here seems to foreshadow many themes in the Notebooks, especially passive revolution (Lo Piparo 1979). However, in this paper I want to highlight not the similarities, although they are important, between this article and Gramsci's position in the Prison Notebooks, esp. Notebook 29, but the differences. Specifically, I want to highlight that in 1918, Gramsci offers an inadequate understanding of the role of the state and civil society in language politics.

This is a sort of corrective to my earlier work where I have followed more closely the description of Franco Lo Piparo that while not thoroughly worked out, already in 1918 Gramsci has grasped the fundamental features of his political theory that he elaborates, expands and clarifies in the Prison Notebooks, which conclude with the 29th Notebook

on Grammar that returns to many of the themes raised much earlier. Here I want to highlight the importance of the differences in how Gramsci comes to understand the politics of language in the Prison Notebooks specifically concerning the role of the state and its imbrications with civil society. To borrow from the work that Rocco Lacorte, Derek Boothman and others are doing, Gramsci's translation of Lenin and Marx into linguistic terms had a profound impact and changed his analysis of language and politics.

Before I launch into this specific argument, I want to point out why this is important. And my point is that this goes well beyond understanding the details of the development of Gramsci's thought. One of the reasons why I want to highlight Gramsci's concept of 'cosmopolitanism' in the context of language, is that it is a term we hear a lot today coming from the mouths of left-leaning liberals, such as David Held, Jürgen Habermas, Daniele Archibugi and many others who confront issues of so-called globalization from a Kantian, cosmopolitan perspective. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the irony of Habermas' position is the inadequate answer he has to questions of language politics such as the role of English in any emerging European public sphere (Ives 2004c).

So part of my project here is to continue my argument that Gramsci provides, in the Prison Notebooks, a consistently historical materialist approach to language, which is different in important ways from so many others within and outside of Marxism concerning language. I have argued that there are important similarities between Gramsci and the Bakhtin Circle, especially Volosinov – but that Gramsci's more political as opposed to the literary orientation of Bakhtin keeps him from falling into a certain idealism easily appropriated by liberals. I have explored at length issues such as the 'carnavalesque' and 'dialogism' in this context. Likewise, the Frankfurt School especially Walter Benjamin provide specific insight that Gramsci does not, and which is crucial, but that as far as a historical materialist approach it is to Gramsci that we should look (Ives 2004a).

I am hoping that other scholars follow these issues up with comparisons with Pierre Bourdieu and so forth.

But my larger concern recently has been about language, globalization, and so-called global English which I argue raise anxieties that need to be investigated. As Gramsci stated in Notebook 29, §3:

Every time the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation or enlargement of the governing class, the need to secure more intimate relations between the governing groups and the national-popular mass, in other words to reorganize the cultural hegemony.

I'll give just a few current examples of this:

Last year on May 18th (2006), the US Senate designated English as the 'national language' of the United States (Hulse 2006). Why, over 200 years after its founding, at a moment when English is trumpeted as the world's language, the US Senate found this declaration to be necessary? And also interesting is that the proposal that English be designated the 'official' language was debated and rejected.

Last December (2006), Tony Blair stated, "It is a matter both of cohesion and of justice that we should set the use of English as a condition of citizenship" and he proposed that permanent residents in the UK be subject to an English test (Blair 2006).

This at a time when, according to David Crystal, some 1 billion people in the world speak English (at least to some degree), a drastic increase from the 250 million who spoke English in 1952, (Crystal 1997: 25). Moreover, David Graddol estimates that by 2015 another 2 billion will be learning English (Graddol 2006: 14).

I suggest that the so-called 'triumph' of global English brings with it certain political anxieties concerning the connections between citizenship, the nation-state and so-called 'globalization' that are also apparent in the rising field of World Englishes, in the plural. Braj Kachru, one of the most prominent leaders in this field has recently argued that English is an Asian language, even if in Asia it has the status of permanent resident rather than a native (Kachru 2004).

To begin to analyze these questions, I look to Gramsci, not of 1918, but of 1935. That is the specific argument of this paper. So I'll quote a little more from Gramsci's article from 1918, "A Single Language & Esperanto":

They [the Esperantists] would like artificially to create a definitively inflexible language which will not admit changes in space and time. In this they come head on against the science of language, which teaches that language in and for itself is an expression of beauty more than a means of communication, and that the history of the fortunes and diffusion of a given language depends strictly on the complex social activity of the people who speak it. (Gramsci 1985: 27)

Now, one of the questions that we, in the 21st century, after the glut of discussion about something labeled 'globalization' have to ask, is whether it is no longer just a small elite group traveling for business or pleasure who want a 'global language' i.e. nomads, but vast numbers of immigrants and migrant workers, workers employed in trans-national or multi-national corporations, and a host of what Gramsci would call 'productive citizens' and complex social activity, would those cosmopolitan advocates of 'globalization' endorse Gramsci's 1918 perspective and correctly note that times have changed, and 'global English' is now precisely that answer to the 'international anxiety' that exists?

In a nutshell, I argue that there is little in Gramsci's writings prior to the Prison Notebooks that leads to any other conclusion. In the historical conditions in 1918, at a time when the increase in world trade of the 19th century, was in decline, the context of post-WWI, such expressions about an 'international language' were indeed, solely cosmopolitan, bourgeois and elitist concerns. But now, telephone 'call centres' in India, a tourist industry that employs millions of workers requiring linguistic skills and continued labour migration would suggest that this is now, in Gramsci's terms from 1918, truly an 'international' concern, global English being in many cases an elitist, class based knowledge system ensuring restricted access to knowledge and power, but in other cases being precisely the result, as Gramsci describes, "the spread of a particular language is due to the productive activity of the writings, trade and commerce of the people who speak that particular language." (Gramsci 1985: 28)

But once we consider his position in the Prison Notebooks, and especially his discussions of normative and immanent or spontaneous grammar – we get a very different picture and a much more adequate framework from which to address our current language politics, one in which the relations between state power and developments in civil society concerning language, politics and identity are central.

It is only in the Prison Notebooks, where Gramsci provides tools applicable so many issues concerning language politics and global capitalism today; from the 'English only' movement in the U.S., Aboriginal and indigenous language movements in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and throughout the world, or the teaching of English in China.

In 1918, Gramsci's argument is that the Esperantists run up against the science of language, but as David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, as well as Franco Lo Piparo note, Gramsci's description of that science is based on two different, even incompatible approaches to language: that of Croce when he notes, "language in and for itself is an expression of beauty more than a means of communication" and the very next clause, "that the history of the fortunes and diffusion of a given language depends strictly on the complex social activity of the people who speak it" is the approach to language that Gramsci learned from his professor, Matteo Bartoli, including here the approach of Ascoli. (For a more nuanced discussion of this relationship see, DeMauro 1999).

Lo Piparo does note the path between Gramsci's under-developed position here and that found in the Prison Notebooks is complex, non-linear and has yet to be philologically explained. But, Lo Piparo contends that there is a conceptual parallel between these youthful interventions of Gramsci's and his mature political and cultural theory. Specifically, Lo Piparo posits similar set of oppositions, although he notes that they are reformulated and enriched, but nevertheless, oppositions. In the early period, according to Lo Piparo, Gramsci uses on the one hand the positive concepts of 'spontaneity' 'consent' 'culture' and 'historical' and on the other hand, the negative concepts of 'imposition through law' 'artificially constructed' 'non-historical' and so forth. Whereas in the Prison Notebooks, Lo Piparo contends that Gramsci has parallel oppositions between, civil society, hegemony, spontaneous consent, cultural direction on the one hand, and on the other, political society, dictatorship, coercion and domination. (Lo Piparo 1979: 119).

I think it is one of the major short-comings of Lo Piparo that he still considers Gramsci to be positing these concepts as oppositions. I will leave to many of the other papers in this conference to give us more adequate understandings of hegemony and its relation to consent and coercion, civil society and political society, and here limit myself to the more linguistic realm.

I am not arguing that this early essay, and those that it is the culmination of, are not insightful. On the contrary, Gramsci's equation of Manzoni with Esperanto itself is counter-intuitive, fascinating, strategically brilliant and gets at one central element of 'hegemony' – that is similarities between apparently differing positions which have the same political consequences, in this case the idealism of Croce with the positivism of Esperanto. Moreover, central to hegemony is the notion that political rule often takes the form of subordinate social groups and the masses in general accepting the ideas and

values of the ruling class in the manner that they also accept the language of the ruling class. For these reasons and more, Gramsci's 1918 article is insightful, astute and an important pre-cursor to many of his central ideas in the Prison Notebooks. However, as I will argue, it does not contain an adequate account of the state, and specifically it underestimates the role of the state in both the imposition of language usage from above, as well as, the possible role for a more progressive state in fostering and enabling linguistic, social and political change which is not solely an imposition from above.

In Gramsci's earlier interventions into this debate about Esperanto, his focus seemed to be on the mechanical and purist nature of Esperanto (as seen even in this article with the notion that Esperanto is inflexible and does not admit change. Any advocate of Esperanto and even its critics would find this an unfair accusation). But in "A Single Language and Esperanto" he Esperanto with Manzoni's plan, we can see he is not making the argument that Esperanto as a language, narrowly defined, is less flexible than others, but that within its social context, just as Manzoni's Florentine dialect is 'flexible' and changeable by those speakers who created it, but not those on which it is imposed.

So when Gramsci argued that to the Sicilian, Napolitano or Sardo, 'standard Italian' is an 'artificial' language, he is not saying it is 'artificial' in itself, he is saying it is artificial to them in the political and social context in which it is being imposed. Thus, he makes an initial shift from focusing on the language itself, to the relations with other languages and the users of language. This is central to his elaboration of 'normative grammar' in the 29th Notebook.

In the Notebooks.

However, Gramsci's descriptions in these few articles in 1917 and 1918 do not capture his latter assessments and understandings of the complexity of what seems like 'spontaneous' and 'free' development.

In 1918, Gramsci describes the resistance to the imposition of language from above, "not even a national language can be created artificially, by order of the state; that the Italian language is being formed by itself and would be formed only in so far as the shared life of the nation gave rise to the numerous and stable contacts between various parts of the nation...." He also describes the process for a truly international language as coming about in the following way. "When the International is formed, it is possible that the increased contacts between peoples, the methodical and regular integration of large masses of workers, will slowly bring about a reciprocal adjustment between the Ayro-European languages and will probably extend them throughout the world, because of the influence the new civilization will exert."

Note here the tentative and passive tone, language changes occur only as a reaction to other changes and not through conscious strategy, policy and effort. (This reminds me of how scholars of 'world English' such as Janine Brutt-Griftler, Abram De Swaan and David Crystal describe the spread of English after so-called 'de-colonization'. I have criticized such approaches (Ives 2006)).

By 1935, when Gramsci comes back to many of these themes in the 29th

Notebook, a lot has changed. I will not go into how this is related to his experiences with the Factory Councils through his time in Russia and his imprisonment, let alone all that should be said about the earlier Notebooks. Suffice it to say, that he has written a lot about 'spontaneity' – including spontaneous philosophy as 'common sense'. In those contexts, he notes that 'philosophy in general' does not exist, that spontaneity is the loss of conscious leadership, etc... he has also investigated the concept of 'immanence' in Kant (see Lichtner 1991 and Ives 2004b: 84-89) not to mention criticized the Fascist Education Act of 1923 in part because it eliminated the teaching of grammar (Ives 2008forthcoming).

He brings all of this to bear in the 29th Notebook where he develops two central concepts; spontaneous or immanent grammar and normative grammar. We can see in his definition of 'normative grammar' that he is adding a lot, even transforming how that term has been used historically from the Port Royal Grammar of 1660 onwards (Ives 2004b: 92-101). But his conception is more or less compatible with that of his 1918 article, "A Single Language and Esperanto". However, his discussion of 'spontaneous and immanent' grammar is not. He argues that spontaneous grammar is indeed not spontaneous per se, but is grammatical conformism, it is the history of sedimentation and fragmentation of previous normative grammars and mixtures and influences that are often un-conscious and merely seem 'spontaneous'.

To highlight the differences that I've noted from the 1918, I'll skip to his insistence here that language change is not to be left as a passive reaction from social and political changes. Rather, he is adamant that a linguistic strategy must be part and parcel of the social and political movement he wishes to bring about. In Notebook 29, §2, he writes:

... it is rational to collaborate practically and willingly to welcome everything that may serve to create a common national language, the non-existence of which creates friction particularly in the popular masses among whom local particularisms and phenomena of a narrow and provincial psychology are more tenacious than is believed.

Note the active position of creating a 'national language' which is direct contrast from his earlier position. He is still critical of Manzoni and the *way* in which a national language was imposed and was still being imposed in Italy and he was equally scathing in his disdain for 'fanatical advocates' of Esperanto.

However, he understood much more clearly how the state and institutions of civil society played active roles in directing the course of language change. In §3, still drawing heavily from Bartoli, but this time, with much greater resonance with his many well known arguments in the Notebooks about the importance of education, journalism and intellectuals, theatre and literature, as well as the 'national popular collective will' in a word, civil society – he sketches out the institutions that are the foci from which linguistic innovations radiate; 1) the school, 2) the newspapers 3) artistic and popular writers, 4) theatre and films, radio etc.... (Gramsci 1975: 2345, Gramsci 1985: 183).

Here it would be an obvious misunderstanding to think that Gramsci concurred with his 1918 point that language change occurs secondarily to these changes in the contacts among productive peoples but he explicitly calls on not only the understanding of this change, as he does in 1918, but the explicit 'intervention' to actively encourage specific

types of linguistic change which I have elsewhere investigated as the bringing together of different spontaneous grammars, the productive, non-parthenogenetic growth of a common language as opposed to the imposition of a common language based on a single normative grammar.

It is this conception, that of the complex notion of hegemony as developed in the Prison Notebooks, that as Rocco Lacorte argues, includes a crucial translation of Marx and Lenin into Gramsci's thinking, which is necessary to begin to understand our current 'questione della lingua' in today's world.

Thus, it is Gramsci's dialectical formulation of the relationship between normative and spontaneous or immanent grammars that allows him to distinguish the politics of attempts at the imposition of a language, whether it be English, 'standard Italian' or Esperanto (all of which have affinities with Gramsci's development of the concept of 'passive revolution') from the active engagement with language politics in the processes of transforming subaltern social groups into potentially hegemonic forces through the fostering of political consciousness and effective struggle.

If we obscure these central elements that are absent from Gramsci's 1918 writings but pervasive in his Prison Notebooks, not only will we misunderstand Gramsci's major insights into the relationship between language and politics, but perhaps more importantly, we will have impoverished resources with which to understand and actively intervene in current political struggles.

David Graddol's latest book, *English Next*, published by the British Council, is an excellent example of a contemporary 'cosmopolitan linguistic anxiety.' Graddol argues that the multibillion dollar industry of teaching English as a second (or non-native) language is facing a severe downturn because of the undermining of the privilege of the native-language English speaker as the most desired teachers. The combination of the massive numbers of people becoming competent in English and the increased usage of English between non-native speakers could spell, as the subtitle of the book suggests, "the end of 'English as a Foreign Language,'" and the "doom of monolingualism." In order for such anxieties (also like the ones mentioned earlier) to be put to productive political usage, we require the full power and nuance of Gramsci's most mature political insight. It is beneficial to begin from Gramsci's categories that he addressed in 1918, that of the *international* and the *cosmopolitan anxieties* over common language or languages, but today, we need to understand these concepts not as static oppositions where either the former or the latter is adequate for 'global English' issues. Instead, more true to Gramsci's position in his last Prison Notebook even though he does not use these concepts per se, we can begin to grapple with the understanding of, and engage in struggle concerning current linguistic manifestations of global capitalism.

Works Cited

Archibugi, D. (2005) "The Language of Democracy: Vernacular or Esperanto? A Comparison Between the Multiculturalist and Cosmopolitan Perspectives." *Political Studies* 53, pp.537-55.

Blair, T. (2006) "The Duty to Integrate: Shared British Values." Delivered Dec. 8. Archived at: <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page10563.asp>

Boothman, D. (2004) *Traducibilità e Processi Traduttivi* (Perugia: Guerra Edizioni).

Brutt-Griffler, J. (2002) *World English: A Study of Its Development* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters).

Crystal, D. (1997) *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

De Mauro, T. (1999) "Il linguaggio dalla natura alla storia: Ancora su Gramsci linguista," in *Gramsci da un secolo all'altro*, eds. G. Baratta and G. Liguori (Rome: Editori Riuniti).

De Swaan, A. (2001) *Words of the World* (Cambridge: Polity).

Graddol, D. (2006) *English Next*. (London: British Council).

Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Ed. & trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Pub.).

Gramsci, A. (1975) *Quaderni del carcere*, 4 vols., V. Gerratana (ed.) (Turin: Einaudi).

Gramsci, A. (1985) *Selections from Cultural and Political Writings*. D. Forgacs and G. Nowell-Smith (eds.), W. Boelhower (trans.) (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press).

Hulse, C. (2006) "Senate Votes to Set English as National Language," *New York Times*, May 19.

Ives, P. (2004a) *Gramsci's Politics of Language: Engaging the Bakhtin Circle and the Frankfurt School*. (Toronto: Toronto University Press).

Ives, P. (2004b) *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* (London, Pluto).

Ives, P. (2004c) "Language, Representation and Suprastate Democracy: Questions

Facing the European Union." In D. Laycock, ed. *Representation and Democratic Theory* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press), pp.23-47.

Ives, P. (2006) "'Global English': Linguistic Imperialism or Practical Lingua Franca?" *Studies in Language and Capitalism* 1, pp. 121-41.

Ives, P. (2008forthcoming), "Global English, Hegemony and Education: Lessons from Gramsci" *Education Philosophy and Theory*.

Kachru, B. (2005) *Asian Englishes: Beyond the Canon* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press).

Lichtner, M. (1991) "Traduzione e metafore in Gramsci," *Critica Marxista* 39, 1, pp. 107-31.

LoPiparo, F. (1987) "Studio del linguaggio e teoria gramsciana." *Critica Marxista* 2, no. 3, pp.167-75.