

LINGUISTIC COLONIALISM AND THE SURVIVAL OF SUBALTERN LANGUAGES: ENGLISH AND IRISH

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An essential aspect of colonialism, as a form of human behaviour that has had an enormous impact on the way the human race occupies this planet, has been the imposition of the languages of colonisers and the suppression of the languages of subaltern cultures or their marginalization as dialects. This form of linguistic pressure can be seen operating within what are today nation states – the tensions between Castilian and Basque, Catalan or Galician in Spain; the pressures on indigenous languages within Canada and the US; the use of linguistic engineering as part of a divide-and-rule strategy in the apartheid politics of South Africa. It can also, of course, be seen operating between nation states. The Japanese colonization of Korea in this century included the attempt to suppress Korean nationalism by discouraging the use of the language in public, especially in traditional ceremonies and customs, and it is ironic today that Korea has adopted a policy to uproot Japanese influences by banning Japanese feature films and discouraging Japanese music (Ito 1992). In its immediate sphere of influence on the northwestern edge of Europe, English as the dominant language of the heartland of Britain has driven the Celtic languages in its vicinity – Irish, Welsh, Scots-Gaidhlig, Manx, Cornish – close to or beyond the point of extinction, as it took over the role of both internal and external communication system in the Celtic regions.

The logic of these examples is the need for a metropolitan elite at the centre of a power system based on internal or external colonialism, to have its language adopted as the central language of the colonial territory, so as to gain easy access to regional populations, either directly or through regional elites who speak the language of the centre as their second language. As a result of linguistic colonialism, some languages have not been able to develop large zones of meaning, in space or time, though they may have developed important semantic fields and stocks of knowledge crucial to the reproduction of their particular linguistic groups. Some simply wither away. As many as 6,000 languages may have been wiped out since the explosion of European colonialism in the 15th century, as people abandoned their native languages and did not pass them on to their children.

The expansion and retraction of languages is not a random process, nor is it linked to phonological or syntactic characteris-

