Language, Literature and Education in Multicultural Societies
Language, Literature and Education in Multicultural Societies: Collaborative Research on Africa

Edited by

Kenneth Harrow and Kizitus Mpoche

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INTRODUCTION

LORETO TODD

The Organising Committee of the University of Yaounde I, Cameroon invited local researchers as well as scholars from around the world to a well-attended Conference in May 2006 on the subject of Language, Literature and Education in Multicultural Societies. The presentations and the subsequent discussions were of a uniformly high standard and much light was shed on the three strands of the conference theme.

The papers ranged from large-scale surveys to minute analyses, but a number of common themes attracted the concern of many of the participants. The most significant of these were:

- the light that can be shed on multilingualism around the world by the analysis of data from Cameroon, one of the most multilingual countries on the planet. The linguistic profusion in Cameroon is not a new phenomenon and the examination of its diversity has a long history. Its folklore, its performing arts and its oral literature have been exploring human diversity long before the study of multilingualism became a research priority worldwide. The link between cultural and biological diversity came up many times but it was the former on which most papers focused.

- the loss of linguistic diversity with the annual extinction of more and more of the world’s languages. Research suggests that the English language will be used by 50% of the world’s population by 2050. Cameroon has already experienced the disappearance of some of its mother tongues. Many of the participants were keen to halt or even reverse this trend because they were aware that the loss of a language is not simply the loss of a linguistic system. It is the loss of an entire culture, its wisdom, its traditions, its unique approach to people and to the world in which we live. Many recognised that the extinction of some languages is inevitable but there was hope and determination that the loss could be minimised and that the trickle of ‘dying whispers’ and ‘vanished voices’ should not become a torrent.
• the theoretical issues that underpin current academic debates, including language maintenance and shift, language policies, language and power, the side-lining of minority languages, and language and identity.
• the impact that the internationalisation of financial markets and the dissemination of information by electronic media has on all but a handful of world languages.
• the need to explore the choice of language use in schools by children and teachers. Should English and French be the ‘chosen tongues’? Should Pidgin English be fully recognised and exploited? Could tens of the indigenous languages not be used as the medium of instruction in education?
• the extraordinary richness of Cameroon literature, both oral and written, the need to encourage writing in the local tongues in schools and in society generally, and the use of more Cameroon languages on the internet.

The Conference Committee deserve credit for initiating this research, for encapsulating a portion of its wealth in this publication, and for recognising that other conferences and other procedures are needed to carry on the research and to implement some of the ideas that were explored in Yaounde in May 2006. The committee members face many difficulties but they can tap into a wealth of resources in terms of student interest, academic talent and the desire to ensure that Cameroon’s multilingualism should be seen as a gift to be cherished.
CHOICES FACING A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY
WITH REGARD TO LANGUAGE, LITERATURE
AND EDUCATION

LORETO TODD

Preamble

This paper is based on research conducted in different parts of the world. In it, I would like to share some of my thoughts on multilingualism and to offer a few comments on how the English Language has contributed to – but also taken away from – the communities in which I have done research. Let us look, first of all, at how one of our greatest dictionaries defines multilingualism.

1. What is ‘multilingualism’?

At one and the same time, ‘multilingualism’ is easy to define and impossible to classify precisely. The OED treats ‘multilingualism’ as a simple noun requiring only eleven words to define:

the ability to speak many languages
the use of many languages

Anyone with experience of the phenomenon, however, knows that no eleven words could possibly explain the complexity of the concept. Every multilingual region in the world is, like every single speaker, unique. Cameroon has much in common with Nigeria or Ghana or Sierra Leone:

- geographical position and bio-diversity
- historical and colonial links
- linguistic affinities in African languages, in the prestige of Arabic, in the use of English and an English-derived Pidgin or Creole.
Cameroon, however, has a much smaller population than Nigeria and uses both French and English as official languages. These are fundamental distinctions that have social, cultural, educational and economic consequences.

Each multilingual country has its own unique set of characteristics. Sometimes, as in parts of Africa, the indigenous languages belong to the same language family; sometimes, as in Papua New Guinea, they come from two or more language families; and often, vehicular languages may be used as systems of wider communication: Swahili in Tanzania, Hiri Motu and Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea. Even more often, perhaps, an outside language, such as English, has been adopted as the lingua franca of education and commerce, as the language of a cultural and economic élite.

The generalisations that can flow from a consideration of different types of multilingualism will undoubtedly have value, and in the hope that my paper will help contribute to such discussion, I will concentrate on three communities where I have spent time and carried out research: Cameroon, Singapore and Britain.

2. How does multilingualism manifest itself in the world?  
(Generalisations can be deceptive)

In 2006, we are not even sure how many languages there are on the planet, largely because we are not absolutely confident of the distinction between a language and a dialect. For the purpose of this talk, however, we can use the figures supplied by the SIL CD *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 2000. According to the *Ethnologue*, there are almost 7000 languages in daily use and their distribution can be seen in Table 1. Thirty percent of world languages are found in Africa; 15% in the Americas; 32% in Asia; 4% in Europe; and 19% in the Pacific.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Total Number of Languages</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>2,058</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americas</td>
<td>1,013</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>2,197</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific</td>
<td>1,311</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>6,809</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SIL would be the first to acknowledge that, although these numbers appear very precise, they are, in fact, both cautious and tentative. However, in spite of such provisos, they are useful for our purposes. It is immediately clear that Africa is, with Asia, the most multilingual continent, and Europe, apparently, the poorest continent in terms of linguistic diversity, although the richest in terms of the world’s wealth. Is there a correlation between linguistic diversity and poverty?

That is not an easy question to answer although it may warrant some thought. Even a cursory survey of the three regions that I will examine will show that we must be careful in our use of such terms as multilingualism in that they can be used to describe very different sociolinguistic phenomena.

3. Malvolian Multilingualism

While acknowledging the uniqueness of every multilingual area, I should like to concentrate on three types of multilingualism, each of which can be seen as being, to some extent, representative. I have referred to these as Malvolian because of Malvolio’s maxim in *Twelfth Night*:

> Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. (Act 2, Scene v: 126-7)

Modifying this aphorism, we may say that ‘Some countries are born multilingual; some achieve multilingualism; and some have multilingualism thrust upon them.’ We shall explore the three types by referring to Cameroon, Singapore and my homeland, Northern Ireland, which is, officially, part of the United Kingdom. Table 2 is based on information provided in the CIA Factbook. I am not claiming that the CIA’s ‘facts’ are always accurate. Indeed, I believe that they should only be used with great care. They are useful, however, in that they provide us with a snapshot of statistical information for Cameroon, Singapore and the United Kingdom that may be seen as indicative of trends. Among its most salient features are these:

- Cameroon’s population is much younger than those in Singapore or the UK, with almost 42% under the ages of 14.
- Cameroon’s population is growing faster than either of the others.
- Life expectancy is lowest in Cameroon and highest in Singapore.
- Women live longer than men in all three societies. *Vive la femme!*
- Cameroon is richest in linguistic wealth; the UK is poorest.
• The UK had the highest per capita income for 2005 and Cameroon the lowest. Interestingly, though I have not included the information, the per capita income for Equatorial Guinea is the second highest in the world; the UK’s is in position 20! I mention this because the discovery and exploitation of a highly-prized commodity, such as oil, can transform a country’s finances almost overnight.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cameroon</th>
<th>Singapore</th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population</strong></td>
<td>16,380,000</td>
<td>4,425,720</td>
<td>61,441,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age Structure</strong></td>
<td>0-14 years: 41.7%</td>
<td>0-14 years: 16%</td>
<td>0-14 years: 17.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15-64 years: 55%</td>
<td>15-64 years: 75.9%</td>
<td>15-64 years: 66.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>65 years +: 3.3%</td>
<td>65 years +: 8.1%</td>
<td>65 years +: 15.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population Growth</strong></td>
<td>1.93%</td>
<td>1.56%</td>
<td>0.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life Expectancy</strong></td>
<td>50.89 years</td>
<td>81.62 years</td>
<td>78.38 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50.71 (males)</td>
<td>79.05 (males)</td>
<td>75.94 (males)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>51.08 (females)</td>
<td>84.39 (females)</td>
<td>80.96 (females)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Languages</strong></td>
<td>c. 200 + English, French and Kamtok</td>
<td>c. 20 - 4 official: English, Malay, Tamil, Putonghua</td>
<td>English, Welsh (in Wales) and Scots Gaelic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy Levels</strong></td>
<td>Population: 79%</td>
<td>Population: 92.5%</td>
<td>Population: 99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>male: 84.7%</td>
<td>male: 96.6%</td>
<td>male: 99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>female: 73.4%</td>
<td>female: 88.6%</td>
<td>female: 99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Below Poverty Line</strong></td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GDP per capita</strong></td>
<td>$2,000</td>
<td>$29,700</td>
<td>$30,900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
People living below the ‘poverty line’ are people who have to live on less than 60% of the average wage in the country in question.

3.1 Type 1 Multilingualism: Cameroon
‘a country that was born multilingual’

Type 1 Multilingualism may be represented by a country such as Cameroon – a country that is perhaps second only to Papua New Guinea in terms of its multiplicity of languages for a relatively small population. I have talked to Cameroonian linguists who put the number of languages in Cameroon much higher than 200 but, even if we accept the 200 estimate, it means that Cameroon has one language for every 81,900 people, that is, it has a diversity index of 0.97. (Only PNG has a higher index. It has one language for every 5,500 people.) When we include the fact that Cameroon’s languages come from four distinct language families:

- Afro-Asiatic
- Niger-Congo
- Nilo-Saharan
- Indo-European

then the scale and complexity of Cameroon’s linguistic wealth is readily apparent. No-one has yet undertaken the sort of linguistic census that would allow us to be absolutely precise about linguistic usage or indeed about the ongoing changes in the country, but I have been in touch with a number of families over a 30+ year period and what has happened to them is indicative of what may be happening in many Cameroonian families. For illustrative purposes, I have selected one family from Anglophone Cameroon and Table 3 demonstrates the sort of changes that have taken place between 1969 and 2006. Expressing the information simply, I can say:

- In 1969, the older generation spoke three African mother tongues regularly and had, as far as I could judge, total competence in each. In addition, they spoke a little English, no French and had a good knowledge of Cameroon Pidgin.
- The second generation had all been to school outside the village. They controlled two African mother tongues perfectly and had some knowledge of a third. In addition, they had mother-tongue competence in English and Pidgin and had some control of French.
By 2005, there were four generations and the fourth generation is still multilingual but their MT competence is in English, French and Pidgin, with only limited competence in the African MT of their great-grandparents and some competence in the African language in the cities where they now live.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family 1 - Anglophone Zone - Original Mother Tongue Nkar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Language Usage in 1969

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>Nkar</th>
<th>Lamnso</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>Hausa</th>
<th>Pidgin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen 1</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ Some</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen 2</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ Some</td>
<td>✓ Some</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Language Usage in 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>Nkar</th>
<th>Lamnso</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>Hausa</th>
<th>Pidgin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen 1</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ Some</td>
<td>✓ More</td>
<td>✓ Little</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen 2</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ Some</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ Some</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen 3</td>
<td>✓ Some</td>
<td>✓ Little</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen 4</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ Some</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>MT Facility</th>
<th>African MTs</th>
<th>European MTs</th>
<th>Pidgin as MT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen 3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1+</td>
<td>2 (English + French)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen 4</td>
<td>3+</td>
<td>1(limited competence)</td>
<td>2 (English + French)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These tables give a crude idea of the language changes that have occurred but a different aspect of Generations 3 and 4 is, perhaps, even more enlightening.

The children of Generation 4 are, of course, still young and may become just as multilingual as their parents, but at the moment they are multilingual in non-African languages, unless we regard Cameroon Pidgin as an African language and, of course, we can make a good case for this. In choosing English and French as its official languages, Cameroon has made choices that are economically wise and educationally astute, but this choice has already affected the linguistic make-up of the country and may affect it more fundamentally in the future. One unplanned side effect of training the younger generations in world languages is that many have been educated for emigration.

3.2 Type 2 Multilingualism Singapore: ‘a country that has become multilingual’

Singapore is very different from Cameroon and yet it shares certain features:

- a colonial past under Britain and
- a conscious decision to make every citizen in the country bilingual

The ‘bilingual’ choice is different, however. Singapore, like Cameroon, saw the economic and educational value of retaining English as an official language, but it also saw the value of raising the status of three other languages:

- Malay
- Putonghua
- Tamil.

The reason for the choice is clearer when we realise that the population is structured as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>76.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2000 census)
The Chinese population is not indigenous to Singapore. They were all originally migrants. Nor do they all speak the same form of Chinese (some speak Cantonese, others Hokkien, Mandarin, Teochew etc). It would have been politically insensitive to choose Chinese as an official language and leave out the indigenous Malay, but it would have been commercially foolish to cut out Chinese and, with that, a link to the country with the most dynamic economy in the world. The Indian population is also entirely immigrant and also linguistically heterogeneous. It includes speakers of Hindi, Bengali, Gujurati, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu. Since the Tamil speakers formed the biggest Indian group, Tamil was selected for special status. Although Singapore gave – and gives – respect to all languages and all varieties of language in the country, it gave official status to four languages but encouraged all citizens to be bilingual:

- the Chinese in Putonghua (or Mandarin) and English
- the Malays in Malay and English
- the Indians in Tamil and English.

In a way, English has been privileged but then, as we shall see, there are excellent economic reasons for such a choice. Singapore has also given status to the original people, the Malays, and linked itself to two of the world’s great economies: China and India. Has the Singaporean experiment worked? If we judge by its economy, its educational system, its literary output, the answer is an unequivocal ‘yes’. It is the only country I know of that has no record of anyone living below the poverty level and its literacy achievements are the envy of the world. By means of legislation and astute educational planning, Singapore has managed to keep alive and strengthen Malay, Putonghua and Tamil while ensuring that English is used with mother-tongue proficiency. Singapore’s model works for Singapore which is, after all, a city state with a small population, but would it, could it, work for a larger, more ethnically-diverse country?

3.3 Type 3 Multilingualism UK:
‘a country that has had multilingualism thrust upon it’

If I tried to deal with the whole of the UK, my talk would either take too long or be too superficial to be of much value, so I hope you will forgive me if I take a small UK area as, to some extent, representative for what is happening throughout the British Isles. It is the area of the UK in which I was born. It is Northern Ireland and, in particular, the area around the town
of Dungannon in County Tyrone. This area has had multilingualism thrust on it in a period of five years.

If I had time, I could tell you about the history of N. Ireland: its absorption of Scandinavians in the 9th and 10th centuries and of Norman French in the 13th and 14th; its centuries of conflict with the English and also its achievements – 5 Nobel Laureates, for example, in the last twenty years. Fascinating as such a talk might be, I want to focus on the present and the near future, rather than on our turbulent past!

Let me take the Dungannon region as a microcosm of the UK in 2006. If you look at Table 2, you will see that I have juxtaposed its figures with the national figures so that we are in a position to make certain claims. The first is

- that the CIA figures for the UK are generalisations and do not apply to all parts of the UK equally
- that life expectancy and per capita income are lower in Northern Ireland than for the UK as a whole
- that there is a higher percentage of people living below the poverty line and, indeed, that number rises to almost 40% if we only consider children
- that, according to the factbook for 2005, only one language, English, is spoken, but I have included Irish Gaelic because very real efforts are currently being made to revive Irish a living language in our area.

Getting statistics for N. Ireland is extremely difficult because everything can be interpreted as a political issue so my starred figures are estimates. The more important issues, as far as this talk is concerned, relate to the statistics on Languages used. According to the 2001 census, only two languages are used in Dungannon and no-one is registered as a mother-tongue speaker of Irish. But in 2006, the situation is infinitely more complex. Today, in Dungannon, we have people from Africa, Asia, the South Pacific and Europe.
Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
<th>Dungannon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population</strong></td>
<td>61,441,000</td>
<td>47,735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age Structure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-14 years:</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-64 years:</td>
<td>66.5%</td>
<td>63.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 years +:</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population Growth</strong></td>
<td>0.28%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life Expectancy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78.38 years</td>
<td>77.36 years*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75.94 (males)</td>
<td>74.94 (males)*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80.96 (females)</td>
<td>80.34 (females*)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Languages</strong></td>
<td>English, Welsh (in Wales) and Scots Gaelic</td>
<td>English, Irish Gaelic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy Levels</strong></td>
<td>Population: 99%</td>
<td>Population: 99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male: 99%</td>
<td>male: 99%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female: 99%</td>
<td>female: 99%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Below Poverty Line</strong></td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>20%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GDP per capita</strong></td>
<td>$30,900</td>
<td>$24,235*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Languages in Daily Use in Dungannon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>2: English, Irish Gaelic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>3: English, Irish, Cantonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>16 not including dialects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let me be precise. Between 1967 and 1997, partly because of the ‘Troubles’ – as we call the 30-year upheaval – there were only a few immigrants in Dungannon: Chinese people with restaurants, Nigerians (doctors), Indians (doctors). The small number of Chinese (variable but fewer than 20) lived apart and spoke Cantonese; the Nigerians and Indians married local women and spoke English. In 2006, however, I have recorded the following languages among immigrant workers in Dungannon:

Cantonese
English
Estonian
Sixteen languages for a population of around 50,000 makes Dungannon, in percentage terms, even more multilingual than Cameroon. I have not mentioned the Nigerians who speak Igbo and Yoruba or the Ghanaian who speaks Ewe, because they use English in the home and do not appear to be passing on their African mother tongues to their children. Africans, it seems, are happy to integrate with the indigenous people. Speaking English at home and at work. Strange as it may seem, this new multilingualism has received virtually no scholarly research although, for the whole of Ireland, it is estimated that 9% of the workforce is non-Irish. (For Dungannon, that means we have approximately 2,500 new migrants.) It is having a big impact on people’s lives. For example, the Police Station now has notices in 5 languages welcoming people, and every person has a legal right to have all documents relating to health or welfare in their own language. Now that I have – I hope – whetted your appetite with regard to Malvolian Multilingualism, I hope you will allow me to backtrack for a few moments to look at the language all three share – English.

4. The Role of English as the World's Lingua Franca

I’m sure you would all agree that we could spend hours talking about the social, cultural and economic impacts of multilingualism but that can come later. What I would like to do now is look at the spread of English, its impact on multilingualism. I particular, I want to examine the two faces of this Janus-like lingua franca that all three communities have adopted.
4.1 English in its role as deBabeliser

At one and the same time, English can be seen as either the world’s deBabeliser, permitting communication where previously none existed, or as a linguistic virus, destroying the vitality of minority languages and causing us to lose the wisdom and wealth that are stored in each human communication system. English is a gift that has facilitated our search for world-wide co-operation and understanding, and it is a destroyer that has infected and weakened languages, especially oral languages. On both a national and an international level, the need for a lingua franca is clear. In every single multilingual country, some language(s) or forms of language(s) have, for centuries, been used as languages of wider communication. In Cameroon, for example, at least six languages (Bulu, Douala, Ewondo, Hausa, Mungaka and Pidgin) have been used in this way and the selection of English and French as the official state languages is the country’s way of dealing with extreme multilingualism. Since biblical times, at least, there has been a craving for a language that could unify humanity, giving us a pre-Babel-like ability to speak a common language. I have not, of course, studied all of the attempts to create a lingua franca that would permit universal communication, but there have been at least 200 of them over the past 2,000 years. The best known – and perhaps the most successful – is Esperanto, the language of hope, a language that would permit co-operation and therefore make war less likely. Yet, in spite of hopes and dreams and aspirations, not even Esperanto can claim to be a mother tongue of more than a few; not even Esperanto can claim to be used in all continents and for virtually all purposes. Without planning, however, this is exactly what can be said about English. It is a truism of modern commentaries that English has, over the last 500 years, metamorphosed from a little-known Germanic language into the world’s deBabeliser. I do not have to remind you of the figures: they are growing at such a rate that by the time I provide a count, my figures are already out of date. We know that, in 2006, at least one in every five human beings on the planet uses some form of English regularly for certain purposes. We know:

- that it is spoken by some groups in virtually all countries of the world
- that it is the most widely-used printed medium
- that more literature has been published in English than in any other language
that it is far and away the most popular language of the internet. We can perhaps illustrate this most succinctly by looking at Table 5.

This table records the ten most frequently used languages on the internet. Let me suggest a number of deductions we can draw from this table:

- English is the most frequently used language on the web, being utilised by well over 300 million people
- The use of English has increased by almost 127% over five years.
- However, two other points are worth stressing:
  - Chinese use has increased by almost 310% and
  - When I examined similar usage patterns in 2000, English use was greater than the use of the next nine languages put together. This is no longer the case.

Table 9 (http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>311,241,881</td>
<td>30.6 %</td>
<td>1,125,664,397</td>
<td>126.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>132,301,513</td>
<td>13.0 %</td>
<td>1,340,767,863</td>
<td>309.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>86,300,000</td>
<td>8.5 %</td>
<td>128,389,000</td>
<td>83.3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>63,971,898</td>
<td>6.3 %</td>
<td>392,053,192</td>
<td>163.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>56,853,162</td>
<td>5.6 %</td>
<td>95,982,043</td>
<td>106.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>40,974,005</td>
<td>4.0 %</td>
<td>381,193,149</td>
<td>235.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>33,900,000</td>
<td>3.3 %</td>
<td>73,945,860</td>
<td>78.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>32,372,000</td>
<td>3.2 %</td>
<td>230,846,275</td>
<td>327.3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>28,870,000</td>
<td>2.8 %</td>
<td>59,115,261</td>
<td>118.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>23,700,000</td>
<td>2.3 %</td>
<td>143,682,757</td>
<td>664.5 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The need for international co-operation raises the issue of which languages could and should be used for this purpose. The answer to the first question is easy: any human language is capable of performing all and every linguistic need, whether national or international. The answer to the second is much less clear. Whether one likes it or not, only a very few of the world’s languages are candidates for the role of international lingua franca. They are:

- Arabic: because of the widespread nature of Islam and because so much of the world’s oil wealth is in Muslim hands
- Chinese: because it is spoken by so many people and because it looks as if China will be the world’s next great superpower
- English: because it is spoken in so many countries and by almost 1 in 5 people on the planet
- French: because it is spoken in so many countries
- Japanese: because of Japan’s economic power.

Other languages may have great literatures and long traditions of scholarship, but in an increasingly interactive commercial world, literature and scholarship will probably count for less than usefulness.

Of the five possible candidates as the medium of international communication, English is undoubtedly the most viable AT THE MOMENT. Over the last four hundred years, it has spread to every continent, probably to every country. At first, its spread was as a direct consequence of the growth of the British Empire. In the twentieth century, its spread continued, partly because of the political and economic power of the United States, but also because, like Everest, it was there. Today, whether we consider OPEC or UNESCO, the EU, the OAU or SEATO, English tends to be the most frequently used link language in the world.

In parts of the world where Britain was a colonial power, there is, in some circles, a degree of opposition to the sanctioning of English as the official language. Most people, however, recognise that the English language is the possession of no single country but belongs to anyone who
uses it. English belongs to all of us in the same way that the ozone layer
does. It is an asset that should be prized and cared for because its loss in
even one area by even one group of people could make us all poorer.

Writers have often recognized the power and value of English earlier
than their political counterparts. They have enriched both the language and
the cultural pool of the world by writing in English. In novels like *Things
Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, in particular, Chinua Achebe has taught all
of us about Igbo culture by describing it in English. He and other Africans
were condemned because they did not choose to write in an African
language, but two points can be made. First, even the critics reached a
wider audience by complaining in English, and the second point is best
made by Achebe himself:

The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his
message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a
medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning
out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar
experience. (Achebe: 1965: 30)

In other words, an African can Africanise English, just as an Indian can
indianize it or an Irish writer can Hibernicise it. In that way, English grows
in value and the world has, perhaps, taken a step away from Babel and
towards international communication.

That is a partial case for the benign face of English, but there is another
face, the face of the destroyer.

### 4.2 English in its role as linguistic virus

In a speech in Mombasa in 1974, President Kenyatta claimed:

A nation without culture is dead, and that is why I decreed that Swahili
would be ... (a) national language. (*Standard*, Nairobi, 14 September,
1974)

The language in question may vary. In Britain, Welsh might be
substituted; in Cameroon, perhaps Douala or Lamnso; but the sentiments
expressed by Kenyatta are understood by any speaker of a minority
language and by any legislator in a multilingual country. Perhaps we
should consider two aspects of the problem:

- Is it true that a culture dies or has to die if a language dies?
• Are hundreds of our minority languages doomed?

I cannot answer either question fully but I can offer a few thoughts on both.

A. Does a culture die if a language dies? - In many parts of the world, languages die as their speakers die or switch to a language of wider use. Often, these languages are unwritten and their demise may go unrecorded. In Britain, too, languages have died but we know quite a lot about their decline and almost total disappearance. Over the past two hundred years English has virtually replaced the Celtic languages in Cornwall, the Isle of Man, the Highlands of Scotland and Northern Ireland. Only Welsh has any real hope of surviving – as a living mother tongue – in the twenty-first century. In my own part of the country, the Irish language only died out as a Mother Tongue in the 1960s. The 1960s are not so long ago, but, in spite of spending millions of pounds on its revival, Irish Gaelic is no more that a poor shadow of its former self. So has our Irish culture died with our Irish language? Not immediately. In the transition period from Irish to English, people spoke an English that used Irish rhythms and pronunciation, Irish idioms and phraseology, Irish semantics. The marks of Irish have, however, become fewer and fewer with each generation. So have we lost our culture? No, not entirely but it is ebbing away. So often, it is the poets in a country, not the linguists that express the pain of loss. In a play called Translations, written by a man from my part of the world, Brian Friel introduces a politician who says:

The old language is a barrier to modern progress. (p. 25)

and a poet who says:

English couldn’t really express us… (p. 25) The Irish language… is a rich language…[a language] full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception – a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to a diet of potatoes… (p. 42)

(The last sentence reminds us that there is no correlation between physical poverty and linguistic inadequacy). As George Steiner reminds us: “Wandering bands of Amazonian Indians can lavish on their condition more verb tenses than could Plato.”
So, can I illustrate the difference between Irish and English? Maybe I can by means of a simple story. A young child wanted to know where God is. The mother, educated in English, answered:

*God is everywhere.*

The grandmother, bilingual in Irish and English and still speaking a form of English that is calqued on Irish, answered:

*God is on the face of the water on the well of the world.*

Are they saying the same thing? I don’t think so.

**B. Are hundreds of our minority languages doomed?** Yes. People who write about the subject may differ in their claims. In April 2000, an article in the *Unesco Courier*, claimed that as many as ten languages are dying each year and added that it seems probable that “50 to 90 per cent of today’s spoken languages will disappear during this century”.

In the face of the waves of English washing across the world’s continents, can minority languages in multilingual countries save themselves from being swept away in the currents? I’m sure the answer to this question is ‘yes, of course they can, but will they?’ A further question might be, ‘Which countries are conserving and preserving their linguistic and cultural wealth?’ I’d like to be able to say ‘All of them’, but that would be untrue. The majority of oral languages in Africa, Asia, South America and the South Pacific are not in imminent danger of perishing, but they are not being privileged in the way that world languages often are. The minority languages that are being preserved tend to be in affluent countries or in countries where we do not find dense multilingualism.

**5. Will language choice affect literature and education?**

When a government makes choices regarding official languages, these choices affect every aspect of a country: local culture, economy, education and literature. Let us attempt a very cursory answer by looking again at our three regions:

**5.1 Cameroon**

In selecting English and French as the country’s official languages, Cameroon made a brave decision. It selected two of the most powerful and widespread languages in the world and it implemented an educational policy that has resulted in a high degree of bilingualism in the official languages. It is, of course, more expensive to have two official languages than one, and it is unlikely that there will be much money left over for
education in the indigenous mother tongues EVEN IF PARENTS WANTED THAT AND THAT IS BY NO MEANS CERTAIN. The bilingual approach has also resulted in an outpouring of impressive literature in both languages. We might ask how much is being produced in the vernaculars. Where is the Lamnso equivalent of The White Man of God or the Ewondo counterpart of Mission Terminée? I have no doubt that they may exist but, ironically, the world only learns of the literature that is composed in world languages. We all understand Obiajunwa Wali’s complaint that Nigerians should write in Nigerian languages and not “go whoring after foreign Gods”. It is interesting, however, that his impassioned plea for literature in local languages was written in English.

5.2 Singapore

Once again, Singapore is in a different position because its official languages are all world languages with their own orthographies and their own long traditions of literature. Evidence is not readily available but, in spite of the fact that Singaporeans could write for huge audiences if they wrote in Chinese or Tamil or, to a lesser extent, in Malay, it appears that many more books – including works of literature – are published in English than in the other languages put together. There is a suggestion that people exposed to literature in English are more likely to write in English than in any other language.

5.3 N. Ireland

Finally, I turn to my own country and I ask about education and literature. At the moment, there are two types of primary schools: schools in which every subject is taught through the medium of English and a number of bunscoils, less than 1%, where children are taught through the medium of Irish Gaelic. I know my own country best of all and I can tell you that the Irish being taught is peppered with English borrowings. When the children use a computer, they can logáil ann (log on) and then logáil as; if they want to scroll up or down, they scróillaigh suas agus síos; they can teicstáil on their fón póca or they can use a printéir or a scanóir. There is almost no limit to the type and extent of borrowing from English.

Will the new multilingualism of my town have an impact on education? It is unlikely that teachers of Portuguese, Latvian or Lithuanian will be introduced in the near future. For the moment, parents seem very content to allow their children to be educated through the medium of English, although they have the right to ask for details of classroom
activity in their own language and this could add significantly to educational costs. If the educational budget is not expanded, this will probably result in larger numbers of children in each classroom, with the potential for a detrimental impact on literacy.

6. Planning: past and future

Strangely, perhaps, for a world in which we talk such a lot about planning for everything from bird flu pandemics to the limiting of gas emissions from cars, or even, in the EU, the shape of bananas, successful education planning seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

In the UK in the academic year 2006-7, approximately £5,000 will be spent on every primary school child and the Chancellor hopes to raise this to £8,000 by 2010. This is a huge amount of money and one might expect that, for such an amount, the government could expect – and demand – superb results. However, insofar as we can judge, literacy problems are worse in England now than at any time in the past, with 40% of boys at the age of 11 experiencing some problems with reading. Throwing money at a problem is not a solution. It does not work, although it may make politicians – and parents – feel better. The time has come, in Britain, to examine the failure of parts of the education system and to plan for – and refuse to accept anything other than – a totally literate population. This is difficult to achieve in an environment where discipline is the exception and where changes are rushed through, often without the agreement of the teachers who are expected to implement them. Serious mistakes were made in the recent past because traditionalists saw nothing wrong with an education system that had worked well for hundreds of years and modernists saw nothing right with it. Both extremes failed fully to understand that pedagogical principles governing a successful multilingual classroom are different in essence from those that work in a disciplined homogeneous setting.

In Singapore, which currently spends less than half as much on each child as is the case in the UK, the authorities planned for – and continue to plan for – a multilingual society where everyone is fully literate in English. They seem to be successful but they have two advantages:

- they are dealing with a small population and
- they believe in absolute discipline.

Even then, there are complaints that today’s pupils are not as hard-working, as ambitious or as dedicated as earlier generations. They are
more affluent and have never known the hardships many experienced even thirty years ago. Nevertheless, Singaporean educationists know exactly what they want from future generations and they are implementing the methodologies that they believe will be successful.

In Cameroon, the government decided that bilingualism – in French and English – was a requirement in the newly united country. With fewer resources than either the UK or Singapore, Cameroon has achieved excellent results over the last forty years. The time has come, however, when it may have to ask hard questions, including the hardest of all, namely, is Cameroon current system educating an elite for emigration? How many teachers, doctors, nurses, scientists have been educated in this country for the benefit of the affluent west?

The point that I wish to stress for all these countries is that language planning is not – and must not be – a one-off decision. It needs to be dynamic, flexible and responsive to social changes. What was right for Cameroon or Dungannon ten years ago may be far from ideal today.

7. Conclusion

I have, in this paper, tried to look at three different manifestations of multilingualism and to ask a number of questions about the nature and role of English – questions for which I do not always have good answers. Perhaps there is a happy medium between the monolingualism of parts of the UK and the extreme multilingualism of Cameroon. Perhaps there is an optimum number of languages that can be built into the educational fabric of any country but perhaps Singapore is so successful because of luck, rather than calculation.

I have no doubt that every one of us here is likely to agree that a multilingual country is rich in linguistic resources and should be wary about following any plan that might destroy such resources for ever. Logically, the death of a language need not and should not be responsible for killing a culture. However, even the most rational and benign choices will fundamentally affect attitudes and approaches to indigenous languages. If a language like English or French or Chinese or Swahili is elevated above Ewondo or Malay or Irish, people will perceive a pecking order. We may say ‘All languages are equal’ but our linguistic choices say ‘but some languages are more equal than others’.