

On Linguistic Imperialism

Emmanuelle LOYER

After the domination of French in the 18th Century, English is now the new world language. As a sociologist, Pascale Casanova shows that using the world language gives authority to those who master it. But what other solution is there, given that a world language is necessary for universal communication?

Reviewed: Pascale Casanova, *La Langue mondiale. Traduction et domination* (Paris: Seuil, 'Liber', 2015), 144 p., 18 €.

More than fifteen years ago, in 1999, Pascale Casanova went against the grain of enchanted views of the literary world and showed, with supporting examples, that the Republic of Letters was a world space manufacturing universality, with its centres and peripheries, its 'Greenwich meridian' and its competitive struggles.

From the language of literature to language in general, the author pursues her thinking in this book with the same powerful and sobering effect: both contemporary respectable thought and formal linguistics posit equality between languages, with linguistic diversity framed as a precious commodity that must be preserved, despite the fact that, in reality, dozens of languages die every year. And yet, today – just like in the past – there is a world language, which is the medium for universal communication, and there are central languages and peripheral languages, all trying to exist on the international stage. The value of this short, incisive book, published in a militant collection, lies in the clarity of its epistemological premises, in the strength of its analysis faced with the usual mollifying views on the topic, and, finally, in the honesty of its conclusions.

French readers who love languages but are constantly required to use English in their professional and day-to-day lives will identify with the paradoxes highlighted by Pascale Casanova. They might even be able to draw some form of practical linguistic ethics from them.

A sociology of linguistic exchange

Pascale Casanova is a French speaker and, as such, speaks a language that is dominated by English, the new world language of the 20th century, now in the position previously held by French from the 17th century until the end of the 19th century. According to her, being a speaker of a dominated but previously dominant language is a productive stance from which to consider the conditions and constraints of linguistic power. And vanity too, because everything passes, including the domination of a world language, as the author shows in her concise but rich diachronic study, based on many works on the history of language. From Antiquity to the Renaissance, Latin dominated as the religious and scholarly language, before being replaced by French and then by English in the last century, until perhaps Chinese takes over. Or perhaps not...

This historical sociology of linguistic exchange, conducted with energy and determination under the auspices of Pierre Bourdieu's thinking, contains a lot of surprises and is genuinely revelatory. The world language, for example, is not necessarily the language of economic or military power. The Romans dominated the ancient world and yet Greek remained the language of the elites, who were bilingual in practice. Similarly, until the early 20th century, French remained the language of international exchange, whereas the British Empire was at the height of its power.

This effect of inertia, brought to the fore by structural analysis, explains the book's new assessment of what Casanova calls 'operations of translation', bilingualism (use of two languages by the same translator) or diglossia (use of two idioms corresponding to two different functions: the language of religion, science, politics, etc.). Usually considered as means through which to escape the power of the world language, Casanova argues that in fact they only serve to reinforce it.

In reality, while, on an individual level, the use of the world language is valued and affords authority to those who master it, on a collective level, bilingualism and the wealth of translations is the clearest indicator of domination. The world language translates very little. Its citizens rarely speak other languages. Conversely, the more peripheral a language, the more polyglot its citizens and the more it tends to translate. This is true of English today and it was just as true in the 18th century when French was dominant.

The international field of languages

But what are we referring to when we talk about translation? The second value of this book is that it creates historical links between different theories of translation and the objective situation of the international field of languages, but also what François Hartog calls 'regimes of historicity'. The age-old domination of Latin until the end of the Middle Ages rested on the undisputed and indisputable authority of the Ancient authors, paragons of an unsurpassable world. The sense of historical decline came to an end with the Renaissance, when 16th century man wanted to create novelty by an active, predatory return to the Ancients: a form of translation-appropriation-imitation championed by du Bellay in *La Deffence et illustration de la Langue françoysse*. Imitating the Ancients meant translating them, but illicitly (without citing them) and ultimately, as the French national poet advised, 'profan[ing] the sacred relics of Antiquity'.

In the 17th century, the power relations between French and Latin changed, as did the mood of the times. Henceforth, contemporaries no longer felt that they were the 'dwarves perched on the shoulders of giants' described by Bernard de Chartres in the 12th century. The Moderns, sure of themselves and their language, now advocated translations that pleased the audience and accommodated clarity, elegance, chastity and the tastefulness of an idiom that had naturalised these virtues, as it were. The 'unfaithful beauties' (labelled such by Gilles Ménage in the 17th century) were openly ethnocentric translations, in which, for example, the Abbé Prévost translating Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* had no qualms about deleting passages deemed boring or contrary to French decorum.

In short, nothing resembling our current vision of the need to be faithful to the original text: this theory only emerged in the early 19th century among German scholars, providing grounds for them to contest the supremacy of the French language. French was the arbiter of

modernity until the mid 20th century, much like English today; the avant-garde, the future in progress.

Linguistic atheism

Or at least, this is what we believe, whether as speakers of the dominant language or as speakers of other languages who lend credibility to English (for example) and value its alleged specific capabilities. Casanova insists precisely on the performative dimensions of these phenomena of a quasi-religious nature: believing in the power of a language gives it that very power and perpetuates the hierarchy. So what can we do, given that, one way or another, a world language has to exist in order to allow universal communication?

First, Casanova replies, we must take an atheist position. In other words, we must not believe that French is more ‘elegant’ or English more ‘pragmatic’; we should use the world language when necessary, but remain fully aware that by using a language we also surreptitiously adopt categories, patterns of thought and ways of seeing things; and we should avoid using this world language when it is not necessary, choosing instead the principle of ‘each to their language’ when this does not impede comprehension.

Her final verdict is somewhat sombre: globalisation and the interpenetration of languages (always in the same direction) makes domination even more fatal. Loosening the stranglehold and preserving multiplicity would take nothing less than languages and cultures withdrawing into themselves, taking greater distance from one another – an approach that seems to be the polar opposite of the logic currently underway. Or else, perhaps we could take refuge in the untranslatable, as advocated by American theorist Emily Apter, also engaged in parallel reflections?¹

Pascale Casanova is pessimistic but on the attack and follows her thinking through to the bitter end, finding a friend in arms in Italian poet Leopardi. At the beginning of the 19th century, he was the melancholy witness to the linguistic domination of his time (French) but also energetically engaged in challenging it by creating Italian-Tuscan poetry that gave nobility to nascent Italy with its enchantments.

First published in laviedesidees.fr on February 22, 2016. Translated from the French by Lucy Garnier, with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.

Published in Books&Ideas, June 9, 2016.

© booksandideas.net

¹ E. Apter, *The Translation Zone. A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).