

Language and power

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The spread of English raises questions of fairness and power that scholars have discussed for decades. Robert Phillipson, in *Linguistic Imperialism*, published in 1992, argued that the global spread of English served the interests of the English-speaking countries and reproduced inequalities between native speakers and others. His thesis has been criticised as overstated, since many non-native speakers choose English freely for their own purposes, but it drew attention to the advantages that native speakers enjoy in international negotiations, academic publishing and recruitment.¹

The Belgian philosopher Philippe Van Parijs, in *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World*, published in 2011, took a different approach. He accepted the spread of English as a lingua franca as desirable for communication across borders but argued that it creates injustices that must be addressed, for example through a tax on native speakers, through the free availability of English teaching and through the protection of local languages by a territorial principle. The Swiss model of territorial language regimes, under which each canton protects its official language while English serves as the shared language of international business, comes close in some respects to the arrangement that Van Parijs recommended.²

For the Basel financial centre, the question of language and power has a concrete dimension. The Basel standards are drafted in English in negotiations in which the native speakers of the United States and the United Kingdom enjoy a natural advantage. The Swiss authorities must then translate the results into their official languages. A Swiss bank that implements the standards must work with two vocabularies. The pharmaceutical groups of Basel, for their part, depend on the approval of the FDA and must present their research in the language and categories of the American regulatory system. English is thus both the instrument that connects Basel to the world and a channel through which external regulatory and legal concepts enter Swiss practice.³

1 Notes

1. Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism*, Oxford 1992. For a critical assessment, see the responses in the literature on English as a lingua franca and on language policy. To be verified. ↩
2. Philippe Van Parijs, *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World*, Oxford 2011. On the territorial principle in Swiss language law, see the commentaries on Art. 70 of the Federal Constitution. To be verified. ↩
3. See Part F, chapter III of this book on the Basel Committee and the role of the main member jurisdictions in its negotiations, and Part G on the importance of the US market for the Basel pharmaceutical groups. To be verified. ↩

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