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Choice, Coercion and Conflict: Linguistic Human Rights, Cultural Liberty and Peacekeeping in a Globalized World

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CHOICE, COERCION AND CONFLICT: LINGUISTIC HUMAN RIGHTS, CULTURAL LIBERTY AND PEACEKEEPING IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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The development of English into an international lingua franca is not, as scholars have argued, an inevitable result of globalization. Instead, the “triumph” of English and the consequent decline of the world’s linguistic diversity cannot be viewed in isolation of the parallel history of conquest, violence, and exploitation. Today, the languages privileged by the powerful—not only English, but also other dominant and national languages, or standard varieties of those languages—are a prerequisite for mobility. This fact renders any discussion of language “choice” irrelevant—when a choice yields the fulfillment of basic human capabilities on one hand and the denial of those capabilities on the other, the issue becomes one not of choice, but of rights. Drawing on Amartya Sen’s work, this paper addresses these issues through the analysis of personal narratives of multilingual individuals, calling for an understanding of language as a right and resource for human development and conflict prevention.