

# Language as expression of unity and diversity: from Babel to Pentecost and beyond

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## Abstract:

The author confronts the reality of multilingualism from historical, cultural and religious perspectives. Complementing the view that language is a means of communication derived from the desire for unity, we should realise that language is also a declaration of diversity derived from the desire for difference. This makes speech an act of trust. This paper is a revised version of an address given at the 28th Meeting for Friendship among the Peoples, Rimini, August 2007. [Editor]

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In Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, after Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit and been expelled from the Garden, they set about blaming each other for what has happened, in what is essentially the first domestic in the history of the human race. I will spare you the details, which are depressingly familiar, but in the end Milton observes:

Thus they in mutual accusation spent  
The fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning,  
And of their vain contest appeared no end. (IX, 1187-1189)

The Fall has introduced alienation at various levels: in the relationship of the two with God – signified by expulsion from his presence; in the relationship each person has with themselves – they are ashamed of their nakedness; and also in the relationship between the two first humans – and this is signified precisely by the corruption of language, which has become both the expression and instrument of division, of difference lived not as complementarity but as separateness, as estrangement, as incomprehensibility.

Here in this retelling of the Adam and Eve story, we have already the two faces of language: language as a way to imagine the world and communicate that conceptualization to an other; but also language at the whim of its users and thus the source and instrument of miscommunication. Language as a tool for building unity, and language as an expression of difference.

Languages are constantly torn between the opposing forces of disintegration and recomposition, of differentiation and homogenization. Indeed it would seem that the centrifugal force, towards every increasing diversity, is a “natural” part of the relationship between language and culture, while the opposite force, of centripetal

standardization and reduction of language diversity, is external to language and is the result of non-linguistic factors or interventions.

The most fundamental and most obvious characteristic of human language as it exists in the real world, is its diversity. All languages differ according to characteristics of speaker, hearer, context. Any reflection on human language as a social reality must begin with variety and diversity as its primary terms. Variety is the stuff of each and every human language: variety within each *language*, diversity between *languages*.

In fact, to consider human language in general, “linguaggio”, we must begin by observing how “language” (It. *linguaggio*, Fr. *langage*) in the abstract, in fact only exists as particular, individual, unique “languages” (It. *lingue*, Fr. *langues*). One of the deepest of the many mysteries of language is the presence on this planet of so many human languages, that are so different from each other.

How many languages are they in the world? or rather, how many communities are there who recognise themselves as “native speakers” of a particular language? Leaving aside questions of definition, of “language”, “dialect”, etc, the number is usually reckoned at around 6,000 (Gordon, 2005). The distribution of languages world-wide is rather like the distribution of wealth, with a small number of very large languages, and many very small ones. A mere 347 (or approximately 5%) of the world's languages have at least one million speakers and account for 94% of the world's population. By contrast, the remaining 95% of languages are spoken by only 6% of the world's people. There are 500 languages, out of the total 6000, that are spoken by fewer than 100 people each, and thus will presumably disappear for ever within the next two or three generations.

Our multilingual planet is populated for the greater part by multilingual humans. The multitude of languages are not shared out on an exclusive basis. The majority of humans are multilingual. This was true in the ancient worlds of all continents and, as far as we can tell, has been true in all historical periods, in all continents. A professional association of foreign language teachers in Perth recently mounted a campaign using the slogan “Monolingualism is Curable”.

This makes it all the more strange that multilingualism is universally seen as a problem, as subversive, even a curse; those who do not speak the language of the powerful are denied rights, civilization, even humanity. For the ancient Greeks,

“barbaros” was one who did not speak Greek but simply emitted sounds, a discriminatory view which the Romans were only too quick to adopt.

All cultures have a story explaining the diversity of human languages, and therefore of customs, of cultures etc: a Babel story (cf Steiner 1975). Most of these stories attribute language diversity either to a terrible mistake – someone opened something and they all got out – or to a punishment of the gods. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition that lies at the heart of European reflection on language diversity there are in fact two stories. In the first, the Babel story of the Old Testament, multilingualism is defined as a divine punishment:

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth. (Genesis 11: 1-9)



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At Babel humans have, like their first ancestors, denied their true nature. The first chapter of Genesis says: “God created human beings in his own image [...], male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1: 27-28). Their vocation is to multiply and fill the earth so as to manifest the presence of the Creator and make the world like a Garden

of Eden. One of the Creator's gifts was the one common language, with which humans could speak to each other and to God.

What happens in the Babel story is that humans stop taking this destiny seriously, they lose interest in the earth and seek to conquer the heavens (Lustiger, 2001). The "image" wanted to become its own model, or God's image without God. But the human who turns themselves into their own idol forgets their true origin and destiny, and risks becoming the victim of their own destructive selfishness. Dante, in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (I, ix), explains what happened at Babel as a forgetting (*prioris oblivio*): the tower builders forget the original language given by God and are condemned to a plurality of mutually incomprehensible tongues, in a confusion of languages, the *confusio linguarum*.

And the confusion would not end here. As the element from which all languages departed and by means of which they multiplied in time and in space, "confusion" would remain inseparable from the idioms to which it gave rise. It would constitute the invariable core of the variable thing we call a tongue (Heller-Roazen, 2005: 219-231).

This confusion of the Old Testament story is, however, redeemed in the New Testament account of Pentecost.

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea,



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and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God. (Acts 2:1-11)

Now, what actually happened in the historical record is the subject of ongoing speculation. But the meaning of this event, in relation to the story of Babel, is clear. The divine intervention at Pentecost does not reverse the linguistic diffusion created with the building of the Tower of Babel. The early Christians do not remember the original, Adamic language, nor do they emerge all speaking the same language. The spirit does not close the "breach" begun at Babel but, as Benedict XVI (2005) puts it, overcomes the breach and opens borders. The newfound ability of the disciples to speak or at least to be understood in a diverse array of languages suggests that the word of God is multilingual, not monolingual. The list of nations constructed by the author of Acts conforms to an established Roman practice of listing nations under Roman rule to represent Rome's dominion over the entire world. Here the rhetorical device to contrapose the political dominion of Rome and the spiritual dominion of Jesus Christ (Gilbert, 2002).

Babel returned to the surface of European myth in the decades following the language reform of Charlemagne. Through his radical language policy intervention and definition of "Latin", Charlemagne effectively set up a new diglossia. The "Low" languages were the vernacular languages, which owe their existence to Charlemagne no less than our idea of "Latin" does. The first public representations of the Tower are in the 9th century, and there is a flood of Towers in the next few centuries. Umberto Eco (1995: 18) describes this moment as the birth of Europe as a self-conscious cultural reality. Europe was born as a new *confusio linguarum*; Europe was born from its vulgar tongues. Only afterwards was it a mosaic of nations.

These myths, and their versions in all the cultures of the world, seem to be an attempt to account for some obvious facts about language diversity: it is widespread, difficult to explain and apparently counter-productive. In terms of the cultural ecology of the human race, it would be much more efficient if the cultures of the planet had agreed to use an ever smaller number of languages instead of producing more and more of them. If, that is, the tension between pluralism and operative efficiency had been resolved on a global scale more along the lines of the United Nations with its

192 member states and five official languages, instead of the European Union with its 27 Member States and 23 official languages.

For all other forms of cultural expression, some form of Darwinian explanation may satisfy. For they are all in some way a response to the environment, in terms of adaptive variation and selective survival. But this will not do for language. It is not the case that surviving languages have more desirable characteristics than dead ones. There appears to be no correlation between linguistic wealth and other resources of a community. The Aboriginal languages of Australia have a morphosyntax as complex as Classical Latin and Ancient Greek. No language is demonstrably adaptive in this sense.

One obvious part of the answer to this question is that language is much, much more than just communication. It is the tool of thought, and expression of identity. For the last few decades, however, much emphasis has been placed on the communicative function of language, most foreign language teaching follows a version of the “communicative method”. This may be changing, given the latest evolutions of trends in educational rhetoric. In Australia and elsewhere, the rallying call now is “intercultural understanding”.

This shift rests on recognition of the deep importance of language in any construction of human identity, individual or collective. In many traditional societies around the world, people speak many languages but recognise themselves in only one. In Aboriginal Australia, still today, most people speak two languages, many up to seven. But “each individual will clearly recognise that he belongs to one tribe and that one language is ‘his’, the other tongues he knows – even though he may conceivably be more proficient in them, prefer using them – are those of other groups” (Dixon, 1980: 32).

The proviso in this quotation – that a person’s “own language” may not be the one that they are most proficient in or that they prefer speaking – reminds us that the privileged status of one of our languages has no necessary link with the notion of “native speaker”. Indeed modern linguistics is moving to abolish the notion of “native speaker” altogether (cf Paikeday, 1985; Davies, 2003), as it is extremely difficult to define and of very limited heuristic value.

I was alerted to the shaky value of “native speaker” by an elderly Italian man some years ago in Australia. Having migrated here in the early 1950s, he made his first trip back in Italy in the 1980s. On arriving at Rome airport he found that his

Italian (mixed with dialect and English) was incomprehensible to his compatriots, he did not even dare try his dialect (from a village not far from Venice and thirty years out of date) and was forced to speak *English* in order to make himself understood. It was, he told me, a distressing experience. And it gave me much to ponder about our glib notions of “first language”, “mother language”, “native language”, etc.

It is a truism perhaps that languages are the banners and ensigns of human groups. In most pre-industrial cultures the name of the tribe or clan or ethnic group is also the name of the language they speak. In Aboriginal Australia there are many cases of the name of a tribe being derived from the name of the language they speak. Thus languages acquire names from some feature of the natural environment, a mythological or historical personage or some paralinguistic element. From this language name is derived a tribal name through, for example, the addition of a suffix or simply using the same word. The reverse is seldom encountered

Furthermore, languages guard our memories and preserve our past knowledge, transmitting it to later and future generations. Any human language binds together a human community, by giving it a network of communication; but it also dramatizes it, providing the means to tell, and to remember, its stories. Languages make possible both the living of a common history, and also the telling of it (Ostler, 2005).

Language unites and divides also through the handing down from one generation to the next. Languages are learned by the young from the old: the very act of the acquisition of the mother tongue is a process of transmission of knowledge, of culture, of wisdom. Italian writer Luigi Giussani stresses the central role of tradition in any educational process. Tradition is the working hypothesis given us by nature to confront reality (Giussani, 1997: 37-38):

Each one of us is born into a certain tradition. Nature casts us into the dynamic of existence, arming us with this complex instrument with which we can confront our surroundings. Every man and woman faces their external reality endowed by nature with elements that one finds in oneself as given, already offered. Tradition is that complex endowment with which nature arms us. We do not possess tradition in order to become fossilized within it, but to develop it, even to the point of profoundly changing it. But in order to transform it, we must first of all act “with” what has been given to us; we must use it. And it is through the values and richness which I have received that I can become, in my own turn, creative, capable not only of developing what I find in my hands, but also changing radically both its meaning, its structure, and perspective.

The handing down of language and the handing down of tradition are in many respects synonymous. The passage from one generation to the next is at the same time an act of continuity and rupture, of stability and of change.

We long for unity, for the recomposition of the fragmented post-Babel world we now speak and think in, we long to live our diversity as mutual complementarity, as completion. We long to remember the language we have forgotten. We invent languages like Esperanto (the root is Latin SPERARE). But this disembodied set of language rules – for that is all it is – attempts to simply cancel or ignore difference, and will always remain, as its name proclaims, a pious hope, a soul without a body.

Is this desire for unity the reason why the world's major religions have, at various times in their histories, selected “dead” languages for recording their sacred writings and performing their ritual ceremonies? Christians, in various times and places, have used Latin, Old Church Slavonic, the *katharévusa* variety of Greek. The Koran records the words of the prophet in “Classical Arabic”, a distinct and non-spoken variety within Arabic diglossia. Hindu scriptures and prayers are in Sanskrit, a name meaning “perfected” as the language was, c.500BC, by Pànini. Much of the Buddhist canon is written in Pali, which has long exclusively used for literary and liturgical purposes. These religions between them account for two thirds of the population of the planet. So we can assert that for the majority of humanity, talking about the Mystery of Being or addressing the Mystery of Being has been done in languages no longer spoken among people.

In language, then, the desire to communicate – literally, to make common – coexists, inextricably, with the desire to be different, the desire to be one with the desire to be other. Of course communication between humans takes many forms, and language is not the only means of communication. But communication of a uniquely human kind happens through language, which in its concrete manifestation always, inevitably, is a declaration of diversity.

It is for this reason that speech is fundamentally an act of trust.

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