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“Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages”

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“Religions differ from one another in ways that are broadly similar to the ways that languages differ from one another. It makes no more sense to ask what is the true religion than what is the true language. They are different vocabularies doing different things.” - John Caputo

If you had to guess the total number of different languages spoken around the world today, what number would you write down? If you ask random people on the street, a common response is “Probably at least several hundred.” Since there are approximately 200 countries in the world, it’s logical to assume a correlation between the number of countries in the world and the number of languages. It’s not even close to right, but it’s a good guess. You would also be in good company in your error: if you check a copy of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* from 1911, a little more than a century ago, the estimated number of languages in the world is listed at around 1,000 (Anderson 10). We’ve come to learn that that estimate is wildly off as well. As best researchers can determine, today there are **7,111 distinct languages spoken in the world today.**

In Papua New Guinea alone, 800 languages are spoken. Indonesia is a close second with more than 700 languages (Ethnologue). And we really are talking about *languages*, not dialectics. For example, at least ten languages are spoken in France (including Picard, Gascon, Breton, Occitan, Provençal) “that are **as different from ‘French’ in at least some cases as Spanish is from Portuguese**” (Anderson 13). Similarly in Spain, in addition to standard ‘Spanish,’ there is also Catalan, Basque, and

Galician. There's Frisian in the Netherlands, and Welsh in the United Kingdom (Ginsburgh and Weber 9). (If you are watching Season 3 of *The Crown* on Netflix, there's a wonderful episode in which Charles is sent to Wales for a semester to learn the Welsh language so that he can deliver a speech in their native language as part of his investiture as Prince of Wales.)

Or, turning to North America, before the arrival of European colonizers, approximately 300 languages were spoken in this land (Anderson 16). Today, that number has been cut almost in half to 175 indigenous languages, and of those 175, **only eight have as many as 10,000 speakers** (Anderson 17).

Around the world, a similar death rate for languages is increasingly widespread. Of the slightly more than 7,000 languages in the world, **"Roughly 40% of languages are now endangered, often with less than 1,000 speakers remaining"** (*Ethnologue*). Extrapolating from current trends, there is a high likelihood that over the course of this century, approximately 3,000 languages will become extinct, "an average of one language every two weeks" (Anderson 42). So by the year 2,100, there may only be only 4,500 living languages in the world.

That's the not so great news. But now let's change the angle, and consider the other end of the spectrum. Of the world's slightly more than 7,000 languages, **"23 languages account for more than half the world's population"** (*Ethnologue*):

Tier 1

1. English: 1,132,000,000
2. Mandarin Chinese: 1,117,000,000

Tier 2

3. Hindi: 615,000,000
4. Spanish 534,000,000

Tier 3

5. French, Arabic, Bengali, Russian, Portuguese, Indonesian: ~250,000,000 million each round out the top ten (*Ethnologue*).

Among these top ten most spoken language, English is by far the most culturally dominant today. At the same time, although "English is spoken almost everywhere around the world, it is still far from being spoken by almost everyone.... **Even in the**

European Union, more than half the population does *not* speak English”

(Ginsburgh and Weber 12-13).

If I were able to make one sweeping change around language acquisition in the United States today, my inclination would be to have all public school children (starting in Kindergarten, but ideally earlier) learn three languages: **English, Mandarin Chinese, and Spanish.**

Irrespective of whether you agree with that specific policy proposal or think it has any chance or ever happening, my larger point is inviting us to consider how significant these various facts about human languages are to various goals in our UU principles:

- Sixth Principle: “creating world community,”
- Seventh Principle: deepening interdependence,
- Eighth Principle: building a diverse multicultural beloved community.

One of the best ways I can think of to help people become comfortable with multiple cultures is equipping them to be able to speak multiple languages fluently. There is an interesting quote along these lines from the poet W. H. Auden: **“Civilization should be measured by the degree of *diversity* attained and by the degree of *unity* retained”** (Ginsburgh and Weber 142).

Here’s the thing about language and culture: knowing only one is limiting. As the saying goes in linguistics (as well as in religions and cultures), **“To know one is to know none”** (Kripal). Now you could object, “How could I possibly not know my own language and culture?!” But I first got a taste of what that means when I started studying German in high school. Before studying German, I thought I had a fairly sophisticated understanding of English, but I began to perceive the deep structure of English grammar and syntax much more clearly when I had another language with which to compare it.

Another reason to study other languages is related to the Italian motto, *traduttore, traditore* (**“translators are traitors”**) (Ginsburgh and Weber 70). Much more than with German, I began to grasp this truth through spending three semesters studying biblical Greek. With every word you translate, you *lose* some meanings from

the original language and *gain* some meanings of the word you choose in the language of translation.

Now, having spent a little time exploring the diversity of human languages, there is one other major factor I wanted to be sure to bring up: the way language evolves over time. So let me go ahead and ask: who are my grammar nerds in the house? I feel you. My elementary school English teacher was a huge proponent of diagramming sentences, which helped launch me toward a lifelong fascination with language and grammar.

But as was likely the case for many of you, I was taught grammar as if what we were learning was “The One Right, True, and Correct Grammar for All Time.” And anyone deviating from that grammatical norm was deserving of the much-feared red marker. But here’s the thing: the more I have learned about the history of language, the more I have become aware than any claim about a stable standard of grammar is an illusion, even over relatively short periods of time.

Don’t get me wrong, we need a certain amount of standardization in language to understand one another. But if you trace the long view of English (or any other human language), the only constant is *change*. We’ll use English as a case study since it is the most familiar language to most of us, but **we could trace the same pattern of change across all human languages** (Deutscher 2005: 55).

Consider, for instance, the following translations from Genesis 6:6 into “standard English” of various given ages to illustrate how dramatically English has evolved over time.

- **2000 CE: “because I regret having made them”**: If we go back four hundred years to the time of the King James Bible—around the time of Shakespeare—the conventions are a bit strange, but still understandable without assistance.
- **~1600 CE: “for it repenteth me that I have made them”**: if we turn back the clock a mere two centuries further to around the year 1,400, when John Wycliffe was translating the Bible into English—around the same time that Chaucer was writing *The Canterbury Tales*—most of us will begin to need some help reading what is supposed to be our native tongue.

- **~1400 CE: “forsothe(*for*) it othenkith(*displeases*) me to have mad(e) hem(*them*)”:**

If we turn back the clock a full millennium to when Ælfric, an English abbot, was translating that same passage into English. He is “celebrated as the greatest prose writer of Anglo-Saxon England,” but most of us will need a lot of help to understand his writing today (Deutscher 2005: 48),

- **~1000 CE: me ofthingth(*displeases*) sothlice(*soothly[truly]*) thoet(*that*) ic(*I*) hi(*them*) worhte(*made*).**

If you dig into the details, Old English and today’s Modern English (sometimes called New English) are clearly two stages of the same language. But it is also true that, **“Within a span of only about thirty generations, ‘English’ has undergone such a thorough overhaul that what is supposed to be one and the same language is barely recognizable”** (Deutscher 2005: 49). Over time, all parts of language have changed and are continuing to change: meaning of words, conventions of word order, pronunciations, and more (Deutscher 2005: 51).

From this perspective of the radical change that happens to all languages over the centuries, all of the red ink that has been spilt in recent decades over split-infinitives, ending sentences with prepositions, who versus whom, “more than” versus “over,” or “less versus fewer” begins to seem like small potatoes.

For those curious, linguists typically identify three major reasons why languages change so drastically over time (Deutscher 2005: 62):

1. We humans tend toward **“pronouncing as little as we can get away with.”** For instance, instead of “I don’t know,” you would still understand me if I said, “*dunno*” (Deutscher 2005: 88). Or instead of “I’m going to stay home,” how many of you have said, “I’m *gonna* stay home” (146). Over time, this trend toward economy simplifies language—and drives the grammar nerds of each age to distraction!
2. **Our minds also prefer patterns.** So whereas English used to have more irregular plurals, words have become more standardized over time. For example, the plural of eye used to be *eyn*, the plural of cow used to *kine*, and the plural of hand used to *hend*. But if you think it’s easier to just add a “s” and say eyes, cows, and hands, then thank your grammatically incorrect forebears (Deutscher 2005: 175)!

3. Our human creativity inclines us toward **expanding the ranges of words' meanings over time.**

So what if we took all that we've learned so far and tried to extrapolate what the English language might be like two hundred years from now?

If we could fast forward two hundred years, one linguist has speculated that in the 23rd Century, we might find that the much maligned single letter “u” for the second-person pronoun “you” has grown more respectable as a word. Just as the English of Shakespeare’s day had a formal “you” and an informal “thou,” we might find two hundred years from now that it has become correct English to use a formal “you” and an informal “u.” We might also find that current acronyms such as omg (“Oh my god) or wtf (what the f—k”) have become accepted usage ([McCulloch](#)). An equivalent would be that **our current word “ok” is as an abbreviation of *orl korrekt*, a jokey misspelling of 'all correct'** which was current in the US in the 1830s” ([Lexico](#)). But now we just say “ok” without thinking of it as an abbreviation. And so the wheel of language continues to change and evolve.

To me the biggest takeaway from the realization that language changes is that you may find yourself a little looser, a little more linguistically liberated when you encounter linguistic innovations, especially ones that are connected to social justice. For instance, I've been heartened to witness the increasingly widespread embrace of **“they” as a singular pronoun** for gender nonbinary folk who do not identify as either “he” or “she.” Of interest to our current discussion, it turns out that, “‘They’ has been used as a singular pronoun in English since the late 1300s, if not before,” and only began to lose favor in the 1700s. Today the singular “they” is having a serious comeback: Merriam-Webster named the singular pronoun “they” as its Word of the Year..., and the American Psychological Association (APA) endorsed the use of the singular “they” in scholarly writing” ([Vox](#)).

Relatedly, did any of you read the fascinating article earlier this month in [The Washington Post](#) about the growing movement to **eliminate the gendered nature of the Spanish language by replacing the masculine “o” or the feminine “a” with the gender-neutral “e.”** This shift could have significant positive impacts in the struggle

for gender equality. For instance, studies have shown that in languages (such as German) in which a bridge is gendered *female*, bridges are more likely to be described as “beautiful or elegant.” In contrast, in languages (such as Spanish) in which bridges are gendered *male*, bridges are most often described with words such as “tall, towering, or strong.” These differences can have serious implications: Researchers at the World Bank, for example, found that, “grammatical gender has a negative causal impact on female labor force participation.” And a recent study of speakers in Sweden, where the gender-neutral pronoun ‘hen’ was added to the official Swedish dictionary in 2015, found that adopting the non-binary pronoun was associated with more favorable attitudes toward women and the LGBTQ+ community” ([Washington Post](#)). We shape language, and language also shapes us: how we are in the world, and how we perceive and interact with each other. May we shape language in a way that helps build the world we dream about.

Works Cited

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