

Whose history is embedded in global languages (and what if nobody notices)?

Michael Barry
University of Detroit Mercy, USA
barrymg@udmercy.edu

Abstract

Linguistics textbooks hold the view that all languages are equally suited for any environment, with a few adjustments in vocabulary. But linguists also tend to believe that the loss of a language from the world “ecosystem” of languages is an unfathomable loss. These two ideas are hard to reconcile to one another, and neither of them represents the whole truth, theoretically or practically. While linguistics textbooks have had good reasons to correct long-held ethnocentric claims that some languages are better than others, languages do have different profiles. People commonly celebrate certain languages’ congeniality to music or to emotion or to precision. Their intuitions should not be dismissed. Meanwhile international languages like English are suited to the needs of globalization. They are more efficient and have fewer ties to place. Those who acknowledge these differences often employ the metaphor that language embeds culture. When linguists make this claim, they are saying that the loss or neglect of a language will carry with it, of necessity, the loss of some aspects of the culture. The losses are by-products of the language choice, and not part of the conscious messages being communicated by its propositions. They include enshrining a culture’s proverbs, norms, and values in the language, carving up reality in accordance with a language’s dictates, and using words that contain clues to social history in their etymologies. Because the content of what is embedded is often unnoticed by native speakers, the total scope of the phenomenon is difficult to explicate. But it is a relatively underreported aspect of language hegemony, and it is important to study even if one believes that the arguments for a global language are persuasive.

Michael Barry is an associate professor of English at University of Detroit Mercy in the United States. He studies American literature and also has an interest in hermeneutics and translation studies. He has taught at universities in China and Turkey as well as in the U.S.

1. International and Convertible

There is a resemblance between our consideration of the fairness, efficiency, and effectiveness of the selection of an international or global language and the scenarios that follow. First: at about the time of the French revolution, and in the decades thereafter, intellectuals and political leaders in France adopt the metric system, in an attempt to replace

weights and measures in use at the time that varied from town to town. Its inauguration as a facilitator of trade quite evidently strives to avoid the local, and it is in fact, early on, envisioned as the international system that it has since become. It combines the decimal number system of Arabic-Hindu origins and an attempt by French scientists to found its simple, mutually intertranslatable measures on naturally-occurring properties of the universe. Now, for better or for worse, there are no more references to the emperor's foot, and moreover, even the naturally-occurring properties that make the basis for some of the measurements are segments of the earth's circumference or of the movement of a pendulum, not measures that are intuitively perceptible to the common individual. Second: Chinese Central Bank Governor Zhou Xiaochuan, at the end of March, 2009, calls for an international reserve currency "disconnected from economic conditions and sovereign interests of any single country," that would replace the U.S. dollar as the benchmark for the exchange of world currency (*Wall Street Journal* editorial, March 25, 2009). (Zhou's proposals were posted in English and Chinese on the People's Bank of China website.)

I am making an analogy to the benefits of a global language, and the analogy holds up in certain respects. Both of the historical events I described above are attempts to make global exchange easier, and to insure fairness by avoiding a medium that has built-in advantages for one of the involved parties. In these new systems of exchange, efficiency is correlated to a lack of character. The envisioned money system will not feature images of kings or native animals.

Both the examples are attempts to choose a global language, such as the language used for air traffic control, scientific conferences, or computer compatibility protocols. English, say. Only not English ... something closer to Esperanto. For the analogy to hold up, I would want to use a language that does not grow out of any specific culture. The choice of English as international medium of exchange of ideas is less like these neutral currency units desired by Zhou, and more like the system that is in place now, the use of the United States dollar. Here is the *Wall Street Journal* on the subject of the advantages for the United States of the current arrangement: "The dollar's status as a reserve currency gives the U.S. enormous advantages, and it should be protected ferociously by our public officials. It means we don't have to repay our debts in foreign currency and that our borrowing costs are cheaper. To the

extent that the rest of the world follows a dollar standard, it also gives us far greater global sway” (“China and the Dollar” March 26, 2009).

Although I do not understand the economic issues, I suspect that the pros and cons of using the U.S. dollar line up pretty well with the pros and cons of using English. Choosing English over other languages for national and international exchanges may be wise, and I will say more about that later; certainly in many contexts it is the *most* neutral language. But of course it is only neutral within limits. Because it is not the vernacular of the populace in most post-colonial countries, its status is like that of Latin in the middle ages, which, as Daniel Boorstin points out, helped the universities in various parts of Europe communicate with each other, but which facilitated a sharp stratification within each society between the learned and the rest (489).

As I said, the best choice would be a language that does not grow out of an individual culture (or “embed” it). But there is not any such language. Conversion of metric centimeters to imperial inches can be checked against a *tertium quid*, the actual length in space. It is far from clear that language affords such a possibility, the possibility of checking the accuracy of a translation by looking at the message or idea stripped of its linguistic clothing.

So the communicative efficiency of a shift toward international languages or to a global language has obvious costs, borne unevenly (See Pennycook). These costs amount to what people lose when they communicate in languages less congenial to their cultures. When we think about rendering a thought in another language, when we think in terms of a transmission model of communication where the message can be encoded in any number of media, and that the choice of one medium rather than another is either a cost of doing business that barely registers, or a choice as unimportant as whether one uses 50 RM notes or 10 RM notes to pay the hotel bill, we lose sight of the important cultural elements that are embedded in each language, that are untranslatable, without remainder, to other languages. We lose sight of the benefits one foregoes, as the language of choice shifts away from one’s own. On the other hand, the contention that cultural knowledge is embedded in language has not always been articulated clearly. What does it mean to be embedded, and if I succeed in using an international language to describe what is lost to me when I decline to use the more local language, have I not maintained that lost thing after all? The answer, I think, is no. But let us

proceed more slowly, since some arguments for embeddedness are overstated, while others are quite strong. My conclusion is not revolutionary, and may settle on the same compromise that lots of other people settle for. The selection of one language over others to conduct global business and to forge global community stratifies local populations and takes away the pleasure of seeing one's tradition as a norm in a larger context, the pleasure and the utility. But efforts to legislate into existence some artificial support for less-widely-understood languages, on the national level and international level, are usually not practical and quite spotty in their protection of individual rights.

2. The Meaning of “Embedded”

Recent books in English on the subject of language extinction argue that as languages are lost, so too are important cultural insights. I will apply this idea not just to threatened languages, but to languages passed over and unused for global purposes, even though I understand that the stakes are quite different, and so are the size of the constituencies. As I said, advocates of language protection say that culture is embedded in smaller languages. One example of cultural knowledge that is cited by Nettle and Romaine (2000), by Dalby (2002, p. 183), and by Harrison (2007) is “ethnobotanical” knowledge. Vast stores of knowledge about the natural world die as the languages that encode this knowledge become extinct. It is a metaphor worth examining, this embeddedness. Ultimately, it is a rich idea that reminds us that the transmission of the semantic propositional information of sentences is only a small part of what occurs in linguistic communication. If we are puzzled by what it means for something to be embedded, it is difficult to explain without relying on another metaphor. But I think readers recognize the use of the term, and understand at least a portion of it as it is intended. I like the term, and to me it means that if we lose the language or translate away from the language, we lose a lot of things that are bundled with it. (By the way, one is almost as likely to read that culture embeds language as she or he is to read that language embeds culture, so the metaphor of embeddedness is evidently attractive. I am willing to allow that a mutual embeddedness seems plausible.) What does it mean for a language to embed culture? Structural linguistics says that a language is a system of oppositional units. Each element depends for its meaning on the possibilities afforded by the system. But that system can also be construed as a web, a network of intertextual connections. As Bakhtin (1990, p. 293) says,

every phrase we use has the marks upon it of the ways in which others have used that same phrase, or a close relative. The experience of “getting” a reference, when one listens to a joke or a poem, means that one grasps some of the threads of this web of intertextuality, and the pleasure of getting it when some others don’t is not to be forgotten when we consider the purposes of language.

When people consider something to be embedded, the figure of speech implies that that something is under the level of conscious awareness; the presence of embedded content exceeds the intended semantic meaning of the sentence. But if embedded content is assumed and unconscious, it can also be close enough to consciousness so that it will become a matter of awareness as soon as it fails—as soon, that is, as it encounters a situation of resistance (the moment a listener begins to doubt that he shares the warrant of a speaker’s argument, a warrant at work when the speaker praises something by calling it “sophisticated” or decries something as “un-American”). Something might be embedded, too, if it is discoverable in the course of careful study of the language, but not resident in the consciousness (or unconsciousness!) of individual practitioners of it. (Later, I will list some words like “good-bye” that give up lessons about cultural history only when they themselves become the object of study.)

Finally, sometimes the things that are embedded are matters of awareness that are just a bit remote from the primary purpose of the linguistic utterance or proposition at any given time, hitchhikers on slightly more purposeful uses of language. (A double meaning, or the exploitation of a signal of informality, a signal that may be available in some languages but not others.)

And so there are several kinds of embeddedness. Misunderstandings and paralysis of communication might arise from a failure to recognize some of them, but certainly not all. I intend now to enumerate some of the issues that linguists and others are trying to express when they speak of embeddedness. This enumeration is a sifting, an attempt to isolate elements that are, according to the implications of embeddedness, not isolatable. That is why the question of whether these elements are conscious or not is so important. If they can be brought to the level of consciousness, then it’s likely that they can be addressed, translated, and thus peeled away from the language itself. And of course, one’s degree of awareness can

be changed just by a nudge, a slight change in perspective, or in directions given. Such a change is likely to occur with some speakers that feel the threat to their culture. In a crisis, when a linguistic identity needs to be upheld, what has been unconscious can now be attended to. All of this means that what is embedded does not lend itself to an inventory. We do not know ahead of time whether an embedded aspect will come into play.

Scholars who have tried to further specify the linguistic relativity hypothesis or the dilemmas of translation are familiar with this exercise. It goes a little beyond the number of words a language has for snow. (My reference right there is itself an appeal to intertextual resonance for those in a community of the study-of-linguistics. You all recognize as a cliché the same thing that I recognize as a cliché. The assurance of this recognition is an advantage of being a “native” of whatever linguistic community one is a part of, and if the language of that community is selected as a means of communication in a still broader community, the advantage of being the native persists.)

On top of the difficulty of listing qualities that are supposedly unconscious, there is another problem, which is that some examples of culture-embedded-in-language are not really examples of culture that might be lost in the selection of a language, but rather, of culture being lost in the adoption of a new *culture*. That is, you may want to say, as I am listing these, “Is that a linguistic phenomenon? Or is it a cultural phenomenon?” If cultural, then again, it may be amenable to being taken out of one language and formulated in another, i.e. translated. Some things that are said to be embedded in language are really just customarily *communicated* in a certain language. This does not lock those cultural practices into that language. Examples abound of cultures that have appropriated foreign languages for their own use. They are able to take these languages with built-in foreign value systems, and make only minor changes to reflect new valuations.

3. Losing what’s Embedded

Here is a list of what people mean when they say that aspects of culture are embedded in a language.

i. Embedding means that the categories with which we perceive the universe are carved up in accordance with the dictates of language. This kind of imposition of culturally-specific cognitive categories on reality can mean that the selection of a language automatically

recognizes as the norm a language's taxonomy of biological species, for example, or its general idea of what falls under the heading of a "religious ritual." It can also mean that the language group with ten verb tenses will be able to discriminate the time relation of an action with more granularity than the language group that has six verb tenses. Recall that structural linguists interpreted the sign as a node in the whole system of a language, where its use and meaning were dependent on "internally oppositional units" (See Ricoeur 1981). We do not understand what "commit" means until we understand that it involves a choice of what form not to use: "commits." Similarly with "commitment," which is not "commission." (Nor is it "commit," "commits" or "perpetrates," but we do not even need to go that far.) Once we appreciate the place of the whole system in the meaning-creation of the individual nugget, we come closer to accepting Wittgenstein's idea that "to understand a sentence means to understand a language" (2001, p. 68). In American English, where most white dialects have only one present tense and where many black dialects use "be" tense that suggests ongoing occurrence, the question has been raised as to how we would approach a translation to Black English Vernacular of a present-tense standard American English linking verb. Does "he is late" mean "he be late?" or "he late"? I take this example from the work of William Labov (1981) because he says that he has considered the benefits of regarding each dialect as a self-contained system – on the basis of the assumption that each dialect "carves up the entire field of meaning" in a way different from the next dialect – and he has come to reject the idea of such a separation of systems, in this case anyway, because most speakers are just not precise enough in their use of tenses to enable them to agree with other members of their selfsame community upon what the tenses mean.

ii. Embedding means that the use of a language enshrines folkways and literary expressions. To select one language over another means selecting its bank of images and its stock of proverbs. If I say that "the quality of mercy is not strained," it has an extra imprimatur of being hallowed by literary tradition. As does the word "imprimatur."

iii. The use of a language also enshrines certain activities as "normal," among its most commonly used metaphors. Just to use the expression "to be in the spotlight" enforces some familiarity with the activities of theatre. And the prevalence of electricity. To say that one will "take a new tack" refers to sailing, and normalizes the activity. "Southpaw" is a term derived

from the orientation of a baseball diamond, and the importance of pitching in baseball. It's best if you know that. (In almost every instance, you don't have to know anything more than that it is a baseball term to appreciate the cultural resonance.) A common acknowledgment of the power of embedded ideas in this respect is in attempts to cultivate gender-neutral language. Gender-neutrality in language has become an important indicator of sensitivity to the damage done by coding the typical human being as a man. Glossaries recommend that writers replace adjectives like "manmade" (synthetic), verbs like "to man" (watch, staff), and nouns like craftsmanship and mastery. (Gender neutrality also involves selecting examples with care, like the examples used of how we should format our names as we type these essays for the conference proceedings. Not all the names should be "John." Of course, this seems cultural, not properly linguistic. It's also not very much embedded—it is pretty explicit. But there is definitely a linguistic aspect: gender neutrality has been difficult to achieve in English without recourse to a singular "they," since there has been heretofore no ungendered singular pronoun.)

iv. When a vehicular language is selected—I get this term from Louis-Jean Calvet (2006)—its social history may be contained in the etymologies of its words. Just as proper names (common ones in the United States include Smith, Miller and Turner) contain clues to the history of common occupations that are no longer so called, some common nouns have such histories too. Soap operas used to be heavily sponsored by laundry soaps. A clothes iron used to be made of iron. It isn't anymore, but if you are curious about its history, the history lesson travels along with the word. The word "goodbye" comes from "God be with you." Those who use this word are not necessarily religious, but whether they know it or not, they partake of a religious tradition. In English, which grew from the same stock as Germanic languages and draws so much from French and Latin, the social histories that are implicit in etymologies are often histories of the Western World, not of an English speaking culture proper. "Salary" and "salad" and "salami," words from Latinate languages, not from Anglo-Saxon, all tell us how important salt used to be. I am especially interested in this category of embeddedness because it is so often not translatable.

v. Words can also contain information, even more transparent than that which is contained in their etymologies, that is not *equally* transparent, not equally inferable, from one

language to the next. No child who speaks English can be unaware of what an anteater eats, or what color a blue jay is. (The idea that a word could be opaque in one language and transparent in another is pointed out by David Harrison (2007) in *When Languages Die* (p. 42). He notes that the English word “cod” is opaque, in that it does not furnish any descriptive information about the animal—does not even reveal that it is a fish.) For some words, the transparency and opaqueness depend on the education of the speaker, so that a word like “psychopath” provides not only an image or a defined condition, but also the information that that condition is deviant, and the word carcinogen contains a whole predicate about causality. These last two words take some knowledge to pick apart, but they are not used exclusively by experts, so they cannot be relegated to a separate corner of linguistic competence. A discussion of these informative, transparent words has to admit of degree, so that we can acknowledge that Old English “earthcraft” is a bit more transparent than “geology” or “geography.”

vi. Embeddedness means that the use of a language assumes a whole system of metaphysical and political values. An ethic that assumes the value of privacy undergirds argumentative discourse in American English. Jeffery Stout, in *Ethics After Babel*, gives this example as he describes the frequent clash of ethical languages, and the resulting difficulty of translating their internal justifications. He also uses honor, insult, and loyalty as examples—he calls this the moral language of Corleones, the characters in *The Godfather*. Someone who speaks the language of loyalty has to be retrained from the ground up to speak, in its place, the language of “human rights” (2001, p. 62). And learning such a second language can never be done in the absence of the first language, in the absence of an initial desire to find word equivalents, which desire will lead to learning the new language through categories of the old. Can such a system of cultural values be translated? Not without expanding the capabilities of the newly selected language so that it can accommodate a foreign assumption and communicate the background of that foreign assumption as easily as if it was not, in fact, a foreign assumption. (But I’ll get back to this when I talk about the likelihood of noticing that which is too familiar.)

Again, one might say, “yes, but that’s cultural, not linguistic. I could have different values and still use this language. In fact, doesn’t my ability to talk about the Corleone code—

among others—show that my language choice, American English, does not commit me to one or another code? One might say, in other words, that Jeffrey Stout is referring to ethical languages, not natural languages. It is a good point, and one to which I will return.

4. Modern, Global, International and National Languages ... Versus Local Languages

All languages have content embedded, and if there is much to be lost when an indigenous language becomes extinct, that implies that such a language has special affinity for the tasks raised by the local environment in which it is spoken. It implies that modern national and international languages are more suited to modernity. I am inclined to say that they are. Global languages are different from local languages.

What it means for a language to be global is that it does not have as many assumptions about local contexts. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), Alasdair MacIntyre defends, on the basis of political commitments embedded in place names, an untranslatability thesis, and according to his thinking, the detached quality of modern international languages affects every conversation that goes about finding the truth. It means that the ultimate determination of whether one has properly justified one's beliefs can never be rational. In his address to the American Philosophical Association, he says the achievement of international languages has been that they have "detached the language-in-use from any particular set of canonical texts" (1988, p.15). This quality has enabled philosophers and scientists to debate incompatible claims in a neutral language, the most important claims being those about how to justify one's arguments. While it may be difficult to accept that any language, including widely-spoken languages of science and international diplomacy, does not already contain the seeds of the answers it prefers, we can at least say that an international language will lend itself to the hammering-out of disagreements more readily than can languages whose metaphysical and political affiliations are closer to the surface.

MacIntyre believes that the local language has more embedded in it. His contention may seem odd. It is not *despite* the years of written-down literary history—the years of academic conferences that have produced uncountable agreed-upon conventions—it is *because* of this long written recorded history, that the local one has more embedded. The local tradition has more tightly policed canons. It has not become the victim of its own growth and diaspora, and

the adoption of its vocabulary consequently carries with it safer assumptions about a local culture.

MacIntyre's ideas add rigor and specificity to the argument that some aspects of a culture cannot be translated away from the language associated with that culture. I agree with the endpoint of his argument: that it simply won't do to conduct translations with an eye toward the eventual discovery that the culture being translated is just like us. But he dwells, in the Philosophical Association address, on the assumptions about truth-justifications that are contained in languages, and I think these may be considered language-independent, or at least translatable into another language. Admittedly, with some difficulty. As Jeffrey Stout explains, that is where "hermeneutical enrichment" can take over. The target language has to grow to accommodate the new ideas. MacIntyre's argument is also unconvincing about another point: that the canons of available reference for modern Western languages, scattered as he says they are, have comparatively little force. The fact that literary histories are written down (freeing up our memories), the fact that they are interpreted in widely different and competing ways, and the fact that scientific inquiry has codified the definitions of so many terms, does not mean that rank-and-file speakers of the languages connected with these histories or disciplinary definitions do not know them. Some do.

MacIntyre would no doubt acknowledge the importance of the development of vocabularies for talking about certain recurring problems, as in "philosophy has developed a vocabulary for talking about meaning." Once a vocabulary is developed, inquiry does not have to start at zero; someone has already sorted out a way of posing some regularly-occurring questions. In philosophy of language, meaning as sense and meaning as reference have grown into separate questions, and the reasons for their separation have been established or at least argued. In ethics, there are boundaries where utilitarianism stops and rights theory starts. In sociology, there are boundaries where labor unions stop and company unions start. A language that does not have these vocabularies will generally borrow them when the need for them arises, as English did from Greek for many philosophical concepts. Once again, it is important to contend that "vocabularies" like this are not always limited to academic disciplines or narrow business interests. Even if they were, their importance shows that everyone's language relies heavily on intertextuality.

That which is presupposed, the familiarity from which hermeneutical understanding takes its steps, is, in linguistic exchange, referred to constantly. Admittedly, these presuppositions are not purely language-specific phenomena, but they have linguistic aspects that cannot be neglected. (For the importance of common presuppositions to language commensurability, see Wang 2007.) Look at argument by connotation or argument that makes use of a telling example. A whole argument can be reduced to a phrase. Someone can refer to a “grassy knoll” in English and English speakers will not only know that it refers to the Kennedy assassination and a conspiracy theory, but will probably even know the speaker’s attitude toward conspiracy theories. Shorthand like this is pervasive. When someone wants to intervene in an argument about abortion, mentioning a coat hanger is a shortened form for an extended argument about the likely consequences of a black market industry. Antoine Berman explains a dilemma experienced by a translator who is trying to decide how to translate “Bedlam” into French. It is a word with associated images, and French, Berman says, has one too—an infamous mental hospital, that is. But the associated images for the French hospital will not be appropriate for conveying the thoughts of a British sailor. So it has to stay as Bedlam. Maybe it will need a footnote.

It is probably evident that the argument for the importance of embeddedness in choosing a language for a particular purpose is again and again reducible to this concept of “intertextuality,” and the concept is impossible to delimit. Look at my list of the ways that embeddedness plays out. The available proverb references are intertextual relations. The relative ease of explaining privacy and the difficulty of explaining insult are matters of intertextuality. So is the pleasure in making connections. A way of thinking about these connections that is less structural and more sociological is that they enable speakers to recognize their own people. In different ways, both the ability to “get” a dead metaphor and the ability to “get” a fresh one can enable people to recognize their interlocutors as kin or community.

5. Noticed or Unnoticed?

The shorthand arguments I have listed are on the way to being clichés, but they point to the role in all language of that which is recognizable. The figures of speech they contain are not quite dead, so they are perfect for enabling people to follow an argument in a small space,

and yet they do not involve the consequent worry that listeners will be left out because they cannot make the connection. That status between alive and settled-upon is applicable to the academic and semi-academic vocabulary too. It is contested, but nonetheless provisionally settled. Steven Pinker has said that we *reason* with metaphor (2007, p.253), but he is talking about live metaphors. As for the dead metaphors, he says that psychological subjects who were tested for their sensitivity to metaphor in argument read right through the dead ones. It is easy to discover expressions and situations where this lack of awareness is operative. People who speak American English use the expression “cotton-pickin hands” without even thinking about the social history behind it. They use “handsome” and “handy” and never notice the connection. People outside the language community are actually more likely to pick up on some of these buried histories. As I said earlier, the question of noticing or not noticing is an important part of the definition of what it means for a language to embed a culture or a history. The status of a metaphor—is it alive, dead, or somewhere in between—is a related matter. There are plenty of states in between noticed and unnoticed, and between the live and the dead metaphor. But answering these questions is essential for determining whether any of the embedded aspects I have alluded to are advantages for the members of the language communities whose language embeds them. If something is embedded, it is likely not to be an area of awareness for native speakers, and if it is not an area of awareness, then it does not confer benefits, at least as far as utility and propositional argumentation are concerned. This is even the case for important cultural presuppositions, which I have said might qualify more as cultural matters than as linguistic ones. The assumption has more power if it is unnoticed, but the person who fails to notice does not share this power, and again, the outsider may be just the person to see the presupposition. In other words, some of the assets might, after all, be liabilities, just as sometimes using shorthand may prevent one from thinking something through the long way. There is a real chance that having the tools in one’s vocabulary does not increase one’s awareness of anything, for it means that we have never had to reach to express certain concepts, and the not-reaching means not-consciously processing.

Anyway, is every person with the linguistic ability to speak Hawaiian expert on fish species? English has a lot of words for trees, but for most of them, my definition stops at “a kind of tree.” (Hilary Putnam (1975, p. 227) calls this the “linguistic division of labor.”) How

likely are the people who speak these languages that are supposedly congenial to some culturally-specific specialization—how likely are they to actually have such specialization? It is no guarantee. It even seems likely that the expertise supposedly embedded in Hawaiian could simply be translated into English. On the other hand, to say that something can be translated does not mean it will be. That moment when a language is not needed is indeed a threshold moment when there is an extra barrier to learning the cultural practice that is associated with it (Harrison, 2007, p.24). Moreover, the interweaving of some concepts with others by the thread of cultural association makes it more likely that an area of knowledge survives only when an area connected to it continues to thrive.

6. Pros and Cons of Global and Local

I am not necessarily sympathetic to the social policies that seem to be required for the preservation of endangered languages, especially if the populations of people are not concentrated in a homogenous school district. But the argument for cosmopolitan internationalism will only be persuasive if its proponents understand the thick webs of holistic cultural beliefs that inhere in any language and perhaps especially in smaller language groups. They will only be persuasive if they are able to see that they are substituting thin for thick. (Will Kymlicka (1996) and Anthony Appiah (2006, p. 45) both characterize the cultures of modernity as “thin.”) MacIntyre is right to point out, in effect, that the condition of a language’s ability to work everywhere is that it does not work especially well anywhere, not if working means being grounded in assumptions about local context. The cultural context embedded in global language is the culture of efficiency, of science, of no-culture. English is, after all, a little like the metric system.

Since I have discussed embeddedness in terms both skeptical and sympathetic, and since I accept as an assumption the fact that in many world contexts, the global is at the expense of the local, let me review some of the ways the arguments militate in one direction or the other.

The pro-globalization idea that we can translate our way out of the problems associated with language hegemony is too incomplete to be a convincing argument.

Neither is the argument in favor of the local convincing, the argument that says that we will necessarily lose knowledge of the natural world as local languages decline. The idea is symptomatic of a scientific-archive-fever, in any case, not a response to globalization.

However, it is plausible to say that in an era when language faces extinction, the community approaches a threshold, and the chances for recovery of esoteric knowledge becomes more remote. The language loss would be correlation, not causality.

Convincing support for a global language—or a challenge to arguments for the preciousness of smaller languages—includes the idea that that much of what is embedded on the level of vocabulary is not noticed by the users of language and therefore holds little sway, that what is embedded in the way of cultural presuppositions could probably stand the test of translation to a new language, and that a new language will still afford ways to identify who is in one's group and who is not.

Convincing arguments in favor of the local are many, starting with the fact that all of the pleasure of the non-propositional elements of language depend on webs of foreknowledge. This pleasure of language is so difficult to measure that it is apt to get lost in debate. And given the holism of indigenous cultures, speakers of these languages lose more when they lose their language than we would lose, we who speak international languages. Furthermore, the international languages have not generally trickled down to all classes of a given society.

Finally, there is a strong pro-globalization position that generally values liberalism and individual rights. It is impossible in most social contexts to artificially prop up a threatened language without violating individual rights, both of unwilling young members of the language community in question, and of members of its rival linguistic communities. This pragmatic consideration may ultimately have to frame all of the others.

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