

## From the world to the word - and back again

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Let me begin with the world. Multilingualism is the default human condition. When we look around the world, that is what we find. Estimates can never be precise, in the language field, but the best opinions suggest that three-quarters of the world's population use at least two languages in their everyday lives, and perhaps half use at least three. Only a few nations - chiefly those with a recent colonial past - have developed an egotistical monolingualism. These are the countries where the case for a multilingual educational philosophy needs to be made, and the UK is one of them. This would be a pointless lecture in, say, Switzerland or India or Nigeria. There may be arguments in those countries about the way multilingualism should be managed, as with health or the environment, or any other domain which makes demands on the public purse, but no-one would question for one moment the relevance of multilingualism. It is seen, quite simply, as one of the facts of life.

And certainly no-one would condemn it, or pour scorn on it, or create frightening stories about it. I remember talking once to a group of teachers in a highly multilingual country, telling them about some of the beliefs about bilingualism that are widely held in the UK, and they thought I was making it up! And telling them about anti-bilingual practices too, such as the infamous Welsh not - a piece of wood with the letters WN on it, worn about the neck of any schoolchild heard speaking Welsh. The child could pass it on to any other child who dared to speak Welsh. And woe betide the child caught wearing it at the end of the school day! An ancient, medieval practice? Not a bit. It was common in schools in Wales during the 19th century. And Wales was by no means alone. The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986: 11) tells a similar story, only it was Gikuyu in his case, and the children passed a button to each other. And it is within easy living memory of many of us that bilingual children in primary schools were told to 'leave your language outside'. Languages other than English were seen as a threat or a handicap, not as a resource and an opportunity.

These have been some of the ways in which the world has had an impact on the word - in this case the words as used (or not used) by individual children. Political ways, in these instances. But antagonism towards bilingualism in children has been present in the world for many other reasons. The whole subject is surrounded by a mythology which has to be eliminated if children are to develop their potential as multilingual human beings.

What are the myths that have frightened people so? Some are very general and very ancient. Those brought up on the biblical story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis Chapter 11 would find it difficult to rid themselves of the belief that multilingualism was a curse, introduced by God to curb the pride of mankind. They were usually unaware that the Bible attests to multilingualism on earth long before the Babel event. In Chapter 10 of Genesis, we are told that the descendants of Noah travelled to various parts of the world speaking their different languages. Perhaps partly related to this is the view that monolingualism is the ideal communicative situation, because if everyone spoke the same language on earth, it is asserted, they would understand each other and thereby foster a world of peace. Leaving aside the question of which language that should be, it is a matter of common observation that monolingualism is no guarantor of peace, as evidenced by the many civil wars that have taken place over the centuries (in Vietnam, Cambodia, England, the USA...). I don't know of any historical study which tries to correlate the degree of multilingualism in a country with the frequency or ferocity of civil wars; but if there were one, I am pretty sure a highly multilingual country like Switzerland would be at the top of any peacefulness scale. The more one recognizes the language of minority groups, the more one removes one of the leading causes of social and political unrest, for language is at the heart of their identity.

Then there are the ten myths about multilingualism as such, well explored in Madaleine Cruz-Ferreira's little book, *Multilinguals are...?*

Myth 1: Multilingual people are equally fluent in the languages they speak (they are 'balanced').  
Reality: This is never the case; there are always situations in which people are better in one language than others (eg the language used for nursery rhymes, for making love, or in which a specialized subject has been learned)

Myth 2: Multilingual people have a dominant language.

Reality: Different languages take turns to dominate, depending on the nature of the communicative situation

Myth 3: One language needs to be given special educational attention to ensure that children develop their full cognitive potential.

Reality: One language is usually chosen as the primary language of education, but this does not prevent subjects being taught in other languages or other languages being used to provide an additional perspective on a subject

Myth 4: Multilinguals have no mother tongue.

Reality: Multilinguals may have several mother tongues. Similarly, asking a multilingual 'Which is your mother tongue?' is the kind of question asked only by people who see language from a monolingual point of view.

Myth 5: Successful multilingualism is for children only.

Reality: Adults can learn other languages to any required fluency level, depending on such factors as motivation and opportunity. There is no absolute target that has to be achieved (eg number of words) and some targets are artificial, the result of a monolingual mindset (eg the need to acquire a native-like accent).

Myth 6: Mixing languages shows inadequate learning - semilingualism.

Reality: Mixing languages is the norm. All it shows is that speakers use all the linguistic resources available to them when need arises. When a speaker switches from Language A to Language B (eg mid-sentence), it is not a matter of A being deficient, but of B being a preferred means of expressing what the speaker wants to say. Monolinguals mix languages too, in the form of loan words and phrases.

Myth 7: The brain cannot cope with multilingualism. Learning a new language threatens the quality of the one already there because there is limited brain space.

Reality: The brain can cope with an indefinitely large number of languages. With over 100 billion neurons available, a language takes up a relatively small amount of space (with just a few dozen sounds, a few thousand grammatical constructions, and a few tens of thousand words).

Myth 8: Multilingualism impairs thinking because one language gets in the way of another.

Reality: That would mean most of the human race can't think properly! Nobody knows exactly how languages are represented in the brain, but what is known is that they are not assigned individual spaces, like bricks in a box, and there is no basis for the idea that one language is somehow blocking another. A multilingual's languages are 'always on', equally available to access. Multilingual people often don't know which of their languages they used on a particular occasion.

Myth 9: Multilingualism retards language development in children, and causes speech disorders (such as stammering).

Reality: This is the result of assessment tools originally devised for monolingual children being inappropriately used to evaluate multilingual ability. If monolingual children were assessed in terms of their multilingual strengths, they would come out as retarded too. There are huge individual differences in both monolingual and bilingual development, so that a simple notion of 'delay' is unrealistic. As for specific symptoms: all monolingual children become non-fluent when they are coping with complex speech processing tasks or where the teaching methods are too demanding.

Myth 10: Parents need to structure the learning environment of the child to ensure efficiency multilingualism.

Reality: Parents need to be natural at all times, using the different languages as need arises. Over the first 3 years or so of life, children are unaware that what they hear around them are in fact different languages.

So much for the myths. What about the benefits?

The issue of benefits is a complex one. Some studies have shown that bilinguals (or multilinguals) perform better at certain tasks than monolinguals, some the reverse, and some show no difference. All we can say with certainty is that the early 20th-century view that monolinguals always perform better than bilinguals was totally wrong, as the comparisons didn't control for age, sex, socioeconomic background, educational environment, or even the language ability of the people they were comparing. Indeed, when we ponder how to control all these variables, we can see how difficult it is to make any generalizations at all. On the other hand, these studies have highlighted the possible benefits of being bilingual, and it is useful to summarize these here. I group them under seven headings (CHAPELS, as a mnemonic).

**Cognitive skills:** Languages make people think in different ways. As a result, multilingualism is likely to promote greater flexibility of thought, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and both verbal and nonverbal IQ. The greater brain activity involved may, as with all forms of mental exercise, reduce the onset of mental disorders in later life.

**Human understanding:** The world is a mosaic of visions, each expressed through an individual language. The totality of human wisdom is not found in any one language. The more languages we know, the more we understand what it is to be human.

**Achievement:** Learning another language (even to a limited level) removes the frustration of being unable to communicate in its setting and generates a strong sense of fulfilment. As with any acquired skill, people are justly proud of what they have achieved.

**Political benefits:** Mutual understanding, alliances and alignments, and other forms of political cooperation are enhanced when the parties know each other's languages. Interpreters and translators foster intelligible communication, but cannot replace the sense of mutual respect which comes from first-hand linguistic ability.

**Economic benefits:** Multilingualism is a desirable skill in the modern highly competitive market-place. At an individual level, it provides a wider range of opportunities for job-seekers. At a corporate level, it promotes interest in a company's products and services, if they are expressed in the language of the customer.

**Linguistic ability:** The more languages we know (even in a limited way), the more we come to understand 'how language works'. We stop being scared of languages and find new languages easier to learn. We also become more aware of the characteristic features of our mother-tongue. English-speaking people often say they learned about English grammar as a result of having to learn a foreign language.

**Social skills:** Learning another language is to learn another culture and another way of behaving. As a result, multilinguals develop a wider range of social skills, become more outward-looking, and are likely to have a greater respect for cultural difference.

So, if bilingualism offers so many benefits to the child as a person, how do we ensure that these benefits are made available to all children growing up in a monolingual environment, and in a world which has for so long been unaware of those benefits? The first step is to form a new climate. And, slowly, we can see this taking place. Many of the myths I have reviewed are less widely encountered today, and it is instructive to review the reasons for the growth of this new climate.

The main reason is that multilingualism has benefited from the global awareness of planetary loss and the importance of ecological diversity. Everyone, from local primary schools to UNESCO, is now concerned about the loss of what has been called our tangible heritage - such as forests, glaciers, and coral reefs, and the species of fauna and flora that inhabit our planet. But if we go to the relevant heritage section of the UNESCO website we will also find there a concern for the loss of 'intangible heritage', referring to cultural and linguistic patterns and practices. Half the world's languages are likely to die out in the course of the present century. UNESCO is well aware of the crisis, which is one of the reasons it designated 2008 an International Year of Languages, and why we now have language

days - notably 21 February (World Mother-Tongue Day) and 26 September (European Language Day). The result has been a significant increase in the public perception of the importance of languages - at least among the language professions, who value the top-down support that organizations like UNESCO and the Council of Europe provide. But there is still a long way to go to increase awareness among the general public. Ask most people when is Mother-Tongue Day and they would have no idea.

UNESCO introduced these initiatives because the member countries were aware of a widespread, grass-roots anxiety among their communities about the status of minority and endangered languages. Remember that we are talking about two different things, always. An endangered language is one at risk of dying out, such as Gaelic or Basque, and in the last 50 years the affected communities have become increasingly active in their efforts to ensure that this does not happen. A minority language is one spoken by a relatively small group of people within a country where another language is dominant, such as Chinese in the UK or Italian in Switzerland. Chinese and Italian are by no means endangered languages, of course; it is their continued value as an identity marker by a minority community within a country - which in some cases reflects a history of centuries - that is the cause of local concern. Either way, there has been a dramatic growth in activism in support of language maintenance in many parts of the world.

Why dramatic? It is the consequence of rapid increased multiculturalism within countries, with its associated multilingualism. Because of the way immigration has gone in recent decades, in our part of the world fostered by freedom of movement in the European Union, it is all but impossible to spend a day without being exposed to language diversity. I once stood in Oxford Street and tried to count the number of languages I heard being spoken, and reached a dozen within a couple of minutes. London is a special case, with some 400 community languages there now, but it is by no means unique in its diversity, as any citizen of Liverpool, Leeds, or Cardiff would tell you. Nor is the diversity restricted to cities. In Holyhead in North Wales, where I live, a town of only some 12,000, I can hear on any given foray down to the port, Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, and more among the employees there - as well as Welsh, of course.

Nor do we have to leave the house, these days, to encounter the reality of multilingualism. We simply have to surf the Internet. It is routine these days to see pages with different flags at the top, symbolizing the availability of the page in other languages. There is often a button 'Translate this page'. And search engines will offer you interfaces with a wide range of modern languages - and not only human ones. Google even offers you an interface in Klingon. We sometimes think that aliens always speak English - as was indeed the case once upon a time - but these days, as we explore the worlds of Star Trek, Star Wars, and Avatar, we find alien languages everywhere - and very sophisticated ones, too, created by linguists, some of which have a huge popular following on earth. (I can't speak for their popularity on other planets.)

This mention of the Internet raises a hugely important point. Those of us who are over a certain age are used to thinking of the Internet, and electronic communication in general, as being an intrusion into our book- and traditional face-to-face conversation-orientated lives. For older people, books are central and the screen is marginal. But for anyone born after 1991 (when the World Wide Web was created), and especially born since 2000 (when text-messaging became a reality), and even more especially born since 2004 (when Facebook arrived), the situation is the total reverse: the screen (whether computer, phone, or video game) is central, and books and traditional conversation is marginal. Our children live in an e-world, and part of our job as teachers is to make the transition between that world and the pre-e-world easy for them, so that they maintain continuity with their past and don't lose the benefits associated with it. How to do that is a different story. Today I just want to draw attention to the linguistic character of this e-world of theirs. Don't be sidetracked by the new styles of a language which have appeared there, as encountered in text-messaging, blogging, and so on. Note the important point: that the Internet has become an increasingly multilingual phenomenon over the past decade. It began as a purely English-language medium of course, but today English is only one of hundreds of languages which are out there. Depending on how you count linguistic presence, only about 40 per cent of the Internet is now in English, and Chinese is poised to take over from English at the top of any league table in terms of number of users (Crystal, 2011: 79). And we ain't seen nothin' yet, for some of the most multilingual parts of the world, such as Africa, have currently very little Internet presence.

So, children are communicating in a highly multilingual e-world, and what makes this world different from anything we have seen before is its accessibility. Foreign languages are now more

visible then ever before, as I have already said. And more audible too, as Voice-over-the-Internet becomes more routine. It is an increasingly interactive medium, as seen in such technologies as Skype and iChat, and the opportunities provided by social networking operations such as Facebook. At a practical level, it offers unprecedented opportunities to individuals or groups interested in improving their foreign language ability - as seen, for example, in the current CILT podcast (on the primary site: <<http://www.primarylanguages.org.uk/home.aspx>>) of a videoconference dialogue between children in primary schools in England and France, one of thousands of initiatives now being practised in schools throughout the world. Once upon a time, children had to travel abroad to obtain a genuine foreign language experience at first-hand. Now they just have to travel into the classroom which has a broadband computer terminal. And, increasingly, they won't even have to do that, for everything they currently do via the class computer will soon be available on their mobile phones. It is estimated that within the next decade, 80 percent of all Internet access will be made via mobile telephony.

And, in many parts of so-called monolingual Britain, a multilingual experience is available even without the technology, for it is there in the mouths and hands of the children attending the school. Leave your language outside? Not any more. Teachers have come to realise the educational opportunities that arise when the multilingual background of the children in their care is seen as a resource. I have observed classes, as I'm sure everyone here has too, in which the language register is a routine part of the school day - children saying good morning in their own language, teaching others nursery rhymes in their own language, singing happy birthday in their own language, writing greetings cards in their own language, and so on. Such exercises go well beyond language learning. They come to appreciate the importance of a lingua franca (English) to foster mutual intelligibility while respecting the role of languages as a means of fostering cultural identity. These children are also living in a world where local regional accents and dialects of English are common. All of them will speak a dialect of English influenced by their mother-tongue, and the same principle applies here: they need to appreciate the importance of acquiring a standard form of English while respecting the role of regional dialects as a means of fostering cultural identity. Respect for languages and dialects is an important step towards respect for the people who speak those languages and dialects, and there is thus a greater likelihood that children brought up in this kind of linguistic atmosphere will develop a stronger sense of tolerance than is often found among the adults in their communities. At the very least, children educated in this way will be in a better position to understand the demands which will be made upon them in a multilingual and multidialectal world.

The monolingual parts of the world are slowly coming to realize that they have been missing out. The process is being aided, at long last, by books and blogs which explain bilingualism to the general public. The book by Cruz-Ferreira is one of two such books that appeared in 2010: the other is by François Grosjean. Interestingly, both authors have started blogs (see references). These and many other authors draw attention to the benefits of bilingualism to the individual who practices it. But there is still a long way to go, as is evident from the confused government decisions which have been made in recent times. Languages still need to improve their public profile. And while I know that many schools and organizations, such as the Association for Language Learning, are doing their bit, there are four activities which I think we should foster, as they have repercussions well beyond the classroom, and help develop the climate of interest and respect for multilingualism that I have been describing in this talk.

First, we need to recognize, publicize, and genuinely celebrate languages on the two big days of the year - 21 February and 26 September. On other days too, if there is a reason for it, but on those two days to begin with. If it begins within schools, it will get into homes via parents, and then into society at large.

Second, we need to institute language awards for excellence in practice - by which I mean any linguistic initiative or achievement by a child that captures the imagination of his/her peers and teachers.

Third, we need to promote the role of the arts in relation to languages - and I mean arts here in the widest sense, including the visual, performance, and literary arts. Children are supremely artistic in temperament, and given the task of expressing a language situation (such as the notion of a dying language or finding yourself in a country unable to speak a word of the language) in an artistic way, they can come up with some amazing results.

Fourth, there needs to be a permanent language presence in a school - a mini house of languages. Schools go in for displays, in natural history, history, geography, and much more, dealing with plants, animals, rivers, planets, and every topic you can imagine.

Language and languages should become a regular part of that exposure, and a small permanent exhibition - of different alphabets, for example - with the items on display changing at intervals, is an invaluable resource. (At a national level, keep an eye on the major projects that are being planned - notably, the 'House of Languages' in Barcelona: information at Linguamon - as these can provide good ideas for implementation.)

I would not be making any of these initiatives if I had not seen them in practice in some schools, usually at secondary level, but sometimes earlier. But we need to make them routine, rather than sporadic, and a Primary Languages show seems a good place to start.

## References

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