



Linguistic relativism in the age of global *lingua franca* Reconciling cultural and linguistic diversity with globalization

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Abstract

Globalization's intertwining of culturally and linguistically diverse peoples is empowered and reflected by an unprecedented worldwide *lingua franca*. This current state of affairs seems unproblematic if, following a simple utilitarian view, language merely consists of a neutral tool for communication, and thus what is said in one may just as well be said in another. But are languages really neutral, though? Or do they contain implicit ontological world views, attached to the cultural framework from which they arise and evolve? Then, if so, would a particular global *lingua franca* – i.e. English – compromise or even threaten both linguistic and cultural diversity?

The following paper poses these questions and conciliates their frequently radicalized answers. On the one hand, it critically revisits the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis and offers a revised theory of linguistic determinism – centered on culture rather than language – which affirms language's ontological non-neutrality. On the other hand, it shows that, within this conception, linguistic diversity can coexist with, and even positively contribute to, the development of a global *lingua franca*; while simultaneously profiting from a *lingua franca*'s capacity to generate a shared plane where linguistic and cultural distinctiveness is not homogenized and diminished, but rather shines through, enabled and reinforced.

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1. Communication and culture

The contemporary multicultural and multilingual world, which globalization intertwines, necessarily calls for a means of equally global communication and understanding, a common language to all, a *lingua franca*. One language in particular spread spontaneously and unprecedentedly as a *lingua franca*, not only at an institutional level but transversally across activities as well as personal relations. For many reasons, most of which are far from linguistic justifications, people's international communication generally occurs in English, despite the vast majority speaking to their own neighbor in some other language.

This phenomenon raises various fundamental linguistic, cultural, philosophical, and political issues that question the current state of affairs and the developments that led to it, and reflect upon what ought to be the future. While some discussions are new – attached to the specificities of modern globalization, and to the unique characteristics of this *lingua franca*'s propagation and presence – others merely restate and adapt historically recurring issues. One in particular often resurges when the institutional necessity for interaction between diverse linguistic groups arises, or even simply when

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people with different linguistic proficiencies try to communicate: ‘what language should we speak?’; or, adapted to contemporary circumstances, ‘why English?’. Indeed, unlike other defining aspects of cultures, language is one that cannot be merely silently and respectfully left untouched: one language must be spoken at some point. But what criterion should guide the choice, and in what contexts?

Perhaps the question does not even matter if, following a simple and unproblematic utilitarian view, language is considered a mere neutral communicative resource, and thus what is said in one may be said just as well in another. But is the solution so simple? Are languages really culturally neutral? Do they not contain, as others have argued, an implicit ontological world view, attached to the cultural framework from which they arise and evolve? If so, would linguistic diversity and multilingualism not pose problems to what it means to speak a *lingua franca*?

These questions set the starting point of the arguments proposed here. They denounce a complex tension between claims in favor of the cultural significance of linguistic diversity –generally regarded as a practical obstacle (mildly put, as a barrier against basic communication; or, from a more extreme point of view, as a radical untranslatability which cannot submit to another language) that a *lingua franca* means to overcome – and the present condition of global communication and worldwide cultural interaction – significantly enhanced by the existence of a *lingua franca*. Although the two seem conflicting, and indeed the discussions on the matter are so often polarized in that way, it shall be shown that linguistic diversity can coexist with, and even positively contribute to *lingua franca*, without abdicating from non-neutral linguistic diversity: by not assaulting linguistic diversity with a homogenizing common language; while not opposing language’s non-neutrality to the global necessity of a *lingua franca*.

The argument unfolds in two stages. First, part I – on *language* – disputes language neutrality, and defends its inherent cultural connection. Language is intimately attached to a way of perceiving, thinking, and being in the world, as both a manifestation and a shaper of a certain way of being: its rational structure, its web of relations, the concepts outlined, the emphasis or disregard used to outline them, and even the evolution of the language. This would usually constitute a cleaving statement against the adoption of a *lingua franca*. However, part II – on the *global* and the *political* – displays the common language (*qua lingua franca*, and only indirectly *qua* English) as a space in which linguistic distinctiveness can appear strongly, while nevertheless within a mediatory plane with others. Though the general argument of this paper includes an intentional discussion of issues that precede the more practical manifestations and determinations of specific norms, there cannot be truly informed norms without the understanding of these dynamics and principles in the first place.

Embedded in the following considerations is an analogous larger debate, explicit in the convertibility of ‘linguistic diversity’ into ‘cultural diversity’, and ‘*lingua franca*’ into ‘globalization’. Indeed, the establishment of a common international language is not an independent self-originating phenomena, but one amongst many that arise and thrive with the modern process of globalization. The discussion of one is necessary and informative for the other. On one hand, expansion of the *lingua franca* embodies the overarching dynamic of globalization; on the other hand, this broader concept of globalization is clarified by the specific example of language.

2. Divided by language

2.1. Language is not neutral: Sapir–Whorf and beyond

In the contemporary debates of global political philosophy, language is usually regarded simply as an instrumental means of communication: it enables the expression of complex thoughts, intentions, positions, and arguments, allowing us to understand and be understood by others, and thus fulfilling a pre-condition for political activity. This view generally comes coupled with the idea, casually assumed or deliberately defended, that language is ideologically, culturally, and ontologically neutral, and so what we say in one language may be said just as well in any other. As a result, such a framework reduces linguistic diversity to little more than an obstacle against pragmatic global political processes, and the nuisance of people’s old-fashioned clinging to their own language or dialect in the face of globalization seems to be just condescendingly allowed to persist – sometimes, a concession of veiled intent that leaves the problem to resolve itself with gradual decline and death.

While it was certainly the need for communication that originated and motivated language’s appearance and development in the first place, it does, however, seem hard to believe that the tools of linguistic communication – e.g. its grammar, syntax, semantics, utterance, written form – grew in complexity throughout millennia of human progress while its role and effects for the speaker lingered unchanged. Is there not a hint of this in people’s accentuated valorization of their native language, beyond either utilitarian practicality or sentimental nostalgia, often in reaction to the propagation of a more efficient and advantageous global *lingua franca*?

The sense of implicit deeper meanings at work in language received substantial philosophical attention around the 18th and 19th century, connected to the nationalistic uprisings and the geopolitical changes preceding and proceeding from the Napoleonic Wars. Language was reconsidered as having a cultural-national connotation, and entered the

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