

Interview with John Edwards

“We are all translators, all of the time”

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Knowledge of one's traditional language – whether Catalan, Gaelic, Ukrainian or any other – is not required in order to identify with that particular culture. Where the original language persists, however, it is obviously a cultural bulwark. It is the relationship between language and group identity that Dr. John Edwards, from St Francis Xavier University (Nova Scotia, Canada), professor of psychology, focuses his research upon. His field has shifted from psycho-linguistics (specifically, looking at how children learn languages) to something called the sociology of language, which looks at language as a marker of some aspect of individual or group identity – how people and groups define themselves in terms of language. Dr. Edwards is to attend a seminar on multilingualism at the UOC in October.

According to the latest UNESCO census, there are 6,000 languages in the world, what is the cause of this diversity?

The question of language origins has always been a vexed one – so much so that, in 1866, the Linguistic Society of Paris ruled that its members could no longer present papers on the theme – these were seen as fruitless speculations, wastes of scholarly energy. But the matter never went away, of course. Linguists agree that the image of a ‘tree’ of languages is a reasonable one: the languages now existing in the world represent the twigs, the larger families to which they belong – Indo-European, Finno-Ugric, Altaic, Semitic, and so on – represent the bigger branches, and as we get nearer and nearer to the trunk of the tree, so we approach the original languages of human beings.

How many were there originally? Was there just one, or were there several – associated with different parts of the world in which the first human beings appeared?

In any event, just as a tree grows and develops, so it is easy to understand how geographical isolation and – of course – a considerable amount of time can combine to produce offshoots – branches and then twigs – from the original trunk(s). These can then be expected to diverge more and more from their parent(s). A classic modern example involves the development of the current romance languages – Catalan, Spanish, Romanian, French, and so on – from the Vulgar Latin. Once the outposts of the Roman Empire lost that close contact with each other, which a powerful central authority facilitated, they began to diverge more and more. Consequently, we see a progression, in which a number of Latin dialects become separate languages.

Despite this wealth of languages, and according to your book *Un món de llengües*, a language disappears on average every 15 days. What are the symptoms of the irreversible decline of a language?

The most basic causes of language decline involve either the disappearance of a speech community, or its subordination to a neighbouring one. The former is of course much less common than the latter – although ancient history does give us hints of early peoples who vanished – disease, conquest, radical climatic change?

Language decline is best understood as a symptom of larger cultural contact (which means, by the way, that it is exceedingly difficult to ‘treat’ in an isolated way). A ‘larger’ culture and language progressively encroach upon the ‘smaller’ one. I put the words in quotation marks here because ‘larger’ and ‘smaller’ need have little or nothing to do with actual numbers of speakers – the important features here have to do with prestige, social dominance and power, political clout, and other markers of importance and status. The net result is that the ‘smaller’ variety increasingly yields up its domains of use to the ‘larger’ one. The old adage had it that ‘all roads lead to Rome’ – well, all linguistic ‘roads’ tend to lead towards a powerful centre, too.

How can we explain phenomena such as the resurrection of the Hebrew language, deemed “dead” less than a century ago, but now with over two million speakers?

Hebrew is generally considered something of a special case, flourishing under social and political circumstances found only rarely. First, a new state emerged for the express purpose of being a homeland for a people united by religion – but not united by (vernacular) language. Consequently, a *lingua franca* suggested itself, a state-endorsed variety for the new Israel. Many Jews had some familiarity with Yiddish, of course, but its closeness to German was not attractive (particularly, of course, after the Second World War). But in fact, long before that dark period for the Jewish people, language planners had already opted for Hebrew – the ancient religious medium.

‘Resurrecting’ Hebrew, and turning what had become largely a religious language into a more vernacular one, was of course made easier by the fact that it had never ‘died’, that it had a strong and longstanding written history, and so on. (There is even some suggestion, in some scholarly circles, that a vernacular Hebrew existed in some European quarters as late as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.)

What is the so-called linguistic ecology?

Linguistic ecology is an easy term to understand – and a necessary one. It simply reflects the obvious need to understand languages in their full social and cultural context. In this sense, it represents what thoroughgoing sociolinguists and sociologists of language have always tried to do in their work: to see the ‘social life of language’ in a holistic fashion, to adopt what might be called a Gestalt approach.

The problem in contemporary work under the heading of ‘language ecology’ is that the term has been co-opted – and its chief connotation, now, is the protection of linguistic diversity, the encouragement of ‘small’ languages, the resistance to the encroachments of ‘larger’ ones, and so on. There is nothing wrong with such a stance, of course, but it is a bit disingenuous to imply that it represents the main – or, indeed, the only – thrust of linguistic ecology. After all, going back to Darwin and the biological senses of ‘ecology’ reminds us that all aspects of the ‘web of life’ are to be considered – even those that have negative or unpleasant features. The implication for language is that a fully-fleshed ecology must surely be more than just a code-word for the protection of diversity.

While languages such as Spanish and Catalan have institutions in charge of intervening in their dynamics of use, this is not the case for others, such as English. Why do some societies adopt mechanisms to control the “purity” of their languages?

As European societies evolved, and as national consciousness grew – and as the influence and global utility of Latin waned – it was entirely predictable that the development of a local language to the status of a national or ‘official’ one would become more and more attractive. The thrust here had been initiated, earlier, by the advent of printing technology – which naturally suggested the need for some standardisation of spelling, grammar and usage generally.

This process then spread further afield, with language academies, councils and similar bodies being established in most parts of the world. The main function of these academies was always the enhancement, the development – and the protection – of the locally dominant variety. The single best known in these regards is of course l’ *Académie française*.

Prescriptivism and purism: these have been the twin watchwords of much institutional activity, and the efforts here – while sometimes linguistically or socially naïve – have always been interesting reflections

of nationalism and emerging conceptions of ‘groupness’. What more natural, after all, than to have a fully-developed and ‘respectable’ medium through which one’s culture is to be officially expressed? English in Britain and the United States has not, of course, been immune to these ideas and aspirations.

Why, then, did neither country establish a formal language academy?

There were certainly efforts made to do so, in both places – but they came to naught. In England, there were strong anti-continental and anti-French feelings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, often accompanied by the feeling that the authoritarianism and regulatory impulses across the Channel were inappropriate for Englishmen! In the newly-independent America, anything smacking of continental monarchism was suspect.

So the ‘solution’ in each of the two anglophone contexts was, essentially, to endorse one-man academies – lexicographers, whose efforts would come to be accepted as establishing linguistic standards. We have, then, Samuel Johnson’s famous dictionary of 1755 and, in the United States, Noah Webster’s work. The latter is particularly interesting, inasmuch as Webster understood his task to be as much ‘nationalistic’ as lexicographical: he is thus responsible for introducing (or, in some cases, endorsing) ‘Americanisms’ that have persisted until today – ‘color’ instead of ‘colour’, ‘center’ rather than ‘centre’, etc. He hoped, in fact, that the British and American varieties of English would eventually diverge to the point that they became separate languages – and thus the new United States would – like all those European polities – have its ‘own’ language.

To what extent can political intervention succeed in protecting languages?

If we set aside political states where authoritarianism can forcefully dictate what it wants, and if we restrict ourselves only to possibilities available to liberal democracies, we find that the answer is almost wholly dependent upon the popular ‘will’. Given that, state intervention can be seen as a codification of broad sentiment, a legislative representation of general wishes and hopes. The language legislation in Québec is a case in point: it has been successful because – broadly speaking – it was supported by the populace.

On the other hand, where intervention does not, or cannot, rest upon the shoulders of favourable public opinion, then success is unlikely. Irish is the only Celtic language that has its own state, in which its status is enshrined in the constitution. This has not meant that Irish has re-emerged as the vernacular of the Irish people. Two further points suggest themselves: first, if legislated efforts had occurred earlier, matters might have turned out differently – in Ireland, for instance; second, it is only ‘small’ or subordinate varieties that give rise to protective impulses, and these then run headlong into the difficulty I have identified before.

In this multilingual world, which you compare to Babel, are monolingual societies the exception that confirms the rule?

I can say here that, indeed, multilingualism is far more common globally than monolingualism. Inhabitants of anglophone societies, in particular – because, of course, of the way in which history has unfolded – are very apt to think that their own monolingualism is somehow ‘natural’. Nothing could be further from the truth. We need go back in history no farther than the Elizabethan age to realise that English was then a relatively ‘small’ and unimportant variety, that English travellers required some facility in other languages as soon as they crossed the Channel, etc. At a societal level, of course, ‘official’ monolingualism is very often the rule, but this need have little or nothing to say about the language fluencies of a diverse population.

With such a wide-ranging panorama, is conflict between languages and their associated identities inevitable?

Contact does not logically imply conflict, of course, and in some real-life contexts it does not. People who come together regularly to trade, for example, may bring their various languages into contact in quite restricted and delimited ways and this may not lead to any particular friction. Nonetheless, to the extent to

which we consider cultural contact to be a precursor to conflict – groups quarrelling over territory, resources, and so on – then to that same extent we can predict that their languages will also be placed in competitive relationships.

The late Peter Nelde framed a law in these regards, by which he asserted that ‘there is no contact without conflict’ – and I am inclined to think that this is essentially true. Given sufficient time in contact, and given the human propensity for competition, for establishing dominance and status, conflict seems virtually inevitable. We may hope that military expressions of this may decrease, but there is little sign that linguistic competition – with winners and losers – is about to fade away.

In societies with official bilingualism and the desire for equality, what factors determine the adoption of one linguistic identity over another?

In liberal democracies, where legislation is meant to reflect the popular will (not precisely, of course, but in broad terms), policies of official bilingualism – like all others – will be more or less successful according to context and to the weight of the more important, but largely unofficial, pressures.

In Canada, official bilingualism (since 1969) has not led to appreciable linguistic difference for the mass of the population, nor has it lessened the ‘two solitudes’ of French and English. Indeed, apart from a ‘bilingual belt’ in those parts of Ontario and New Brunswick that border Québec, the country is tending to greater, not lesser, linguistic polarisation. It is something of an irony, perhaps, that the advent of official Canadian bilingualism more or less coincided with an official policy of monolingualism in Québec.

What about the Belgian case?

A different approach was taken by Belgium, where the result has been a sort of ‘twinning monolingualisms’ in the two halves of the country. Here, there is also linguistic polarisation – this time officially endorsed at the territorial level. In both the Canadian and Belgian cases, however, we see attempts to fashion language policies that will either maintain an existing social status quo or try to ‘encourage’ some desirable linguistic movement. This latter effort has not achieved marked success.

Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Conrad and Samuel Beckett were some of the writers who triumphed while writing in a language that was not their mother tongue. Do language skills know no borders?

It is obviously true that there are individuals whose bi- or multilingual competences are sufficiently developed that they can rise to great heights in languages other than their maternal variety. We are really only talking, then, about people who are particularly good in their multilingual facility – some of whom, naturally enough, will become visible through their literary or other efforts. It is perhaps worth noting that many of the writers that we (properly) praise for their literary skills in a language that is not their first, remain markedly ‘foreign’ in their personal speech. Conrad is an obvious case in point here. The formality of writing imposes a discipline, and allows reflection, re-writing, and so on – and it is therefore not at all surprising that individuals who achieve great fluency with the written word may not be able to match that fluency in spoken language.

Alongside the loss of inherent meaning in translations, some authors also feel the need to revise translations every so often in order to adapt them to the linguistic spirit of the times. Is there such a thing as the “perfect” translation?

There may be more or less ‘perfect’ translation possible in extremely simple, extremely direct, and extremely prosaic language. But as soon as we depart from such simplicity, difficulties present themselves. This is simply because languages – while all equally valid systems of communication – are not the same in the way they represent reality.

Broadly speaking, the greatest translation difficulties are found at the opposite ends of the linguistic spectrum. On the one hand, trying to express in one language the slang terms, the profanity, the ‘street language’ of another has always posed great problems. On the other, the dense, abstract and allusive qualities of poetry can be equally problematic. Furthermore, we can see these processes at work within one language – the words, the expressions and the style of earlier ages are not those of our own, and

anyone who tries to read a book written even a century ago can attest to this. The obvious answer, then, is translation – and re-translation, as necessary. The translations of the Greek tragedies into the English of the seventeenth century will obviously not ‘work’ for readers and audiences today.

Do you consider translation to be an art?

It is also quite clear that no *verbum pro verbo* translation exercise will suffice. That is why translation is an art, and why two contemporary translations of the same foreign-language work can be quite different. All acts of translation involve interpretation, and that’s something we all must do, all the time, even within the confines of our own language. We must always ‘interpret’, or ‘read between the lines’, or try and understand what someone ‘really means’, and so on. In this sense, we are all translators, all of the time.

Profile

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