Emerging Trends in Global (Indian) Multilingualism: Perceptions, Practices and Policy

‘Hanging on’ to multilingualism
in a homogenising monolingual-imperial ‘glocal’ context…
or
‘the displaced should never expect a rose garden…’

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Preliminary pre-ambulation…

Having just entered my seventieth year of multilingual living, it feels somehow strange to have been invited to contribute to a volume on the perceptions, practices and policies of ‘multilingualism’. Indeed, just as monolingual living appears ‘normal’ to those who live their lives ‘by’ it – especially if your sole language is an ‘imperial’ one, with everyone else deferring to and learning it as the new global lingua franca – so does it feel ‘normal’ for me to speak and converse in about 5 or 6 different languages in an on-going and even simultaneous manner. Not needing a dictionary for another 5 (or so) languages when participating in a conversation on a more than a rudimentary ‘where’s the bakery?’ level and – with some effort and assistance – being able to read and understand another few has become a simple fact of on-going living and – for me - it represents not really something you’d ‘write’ about… Indeed, having lived and worked for extended periods in most continents ii and, as I will try and show, for me, a Flemish-Belgian, being born in a tri-lingual country – a kind of a multilingual baptism of fire – mixing and matching languages comes naturally… sort of… and it does help with the rose garden, although not entirely.

Especially, one probably wouldn’t (want to) write about multilingualism in the ‘official’ national language of Australia, my country of residence for the last 27 years. Australia is the country which, for a long while, bestowed on me the identifying acronym of being of ‘NESB’ (Non-English-Speaking-Background) and, more recently, of ‘CALD’ - ‘Culturally And Linguistically Diverse’ – background. Which, of course, makes you think what then the background would be called of those who are not given this ‘diversity’ attribute… those often referred to as the ‘real’ Australians; for those who are really convinced of the status of the English language, probably something like ‘Culturally And Linguistically Imperial …? or Homogenous…? or Monotonous… probably…? A ‘CALD’ friend even ventured ‘CALB’ with a B for Culturally and Linguistically Boring … But that’s being biased… obviously… and not very nice towards those who have ‘welcomed us’ to the country their (English) ancestors invaded and claimed for their King in 1788 or so…

…and I can also hear the cacophonic chorus of howls from New Zealanders, South Africans, Irish, Scots, North Americans… not to speak from Indians and other sub-continental Asians roaming the land of Down Under… protesting my uninformed, inconsiderate - and probably ‘reverse racist’ – comments… gradually merging with
an indignant coda intoned by ‘true Aussies’, urging me to ‘go back to where I came from if I don’t like it here…’

Indeed, the ingratitude!

Still, staying with invasions for a while… as I write these reflections in the office of the Borderlands Cooperative in Melbourne, my attention is drawn to a map on the wall presenting the 11 distinct Aboriginal languages and 38 dialects/linguistic subgroups spoken in the state of Victoria before and still during the early decades immediately following the English appropriation of the country – as they bluntly declared it to be ‘terra nullius’ – ‘land of no-one’. Many of those languages are extinguished or close to extinction in spite of survivors’ valiant attempts at keeping them alive. Many Aborigines spoke four or more languages/dialects, indeed rendering multilingualism an everyday feature of their autonomous-but-proximate socio-ecological living contexts.

Through a partly common idiom – to which the notion of Lingua Franca barely applies – Aboriginal peoples shared the characteristics of their wider region whilst also remaining compelled to express the more specific and distinct sounds and significative vocabulary associated with and expressive of their more unique and local social-ecology. This is/was common to all sentient and other beings part of the natural world, notably eucalypts which, in a continuous and mutually adaptive dance with their physical environment, evolved into numerous species, often in very close geographic proximity (Gammage, 2011). Jared Diamond (2013:369), in The World until Yesterday, shares his experience in neighbouring Papua New Guinea where, in a group of 20 men, ‘…the smallest number of languages that anyone spoke was 5. Several men spoke from 8 to 12 languages, and the champion was a man who spoke 15. Except for English, which New Guineans often learn at school by studying books, everyone had acquired all of his other languages socially without books.’ (my emphasis)

As I was to discover similarly in the course of my work in Africa in the mid- to late sixties, ‘socially acquired multilingualism’ may be thought of as a common feature of those cultures regularly referred to as ‘primitive’, ‘under-developed’ or worse by those of us who ‘belong’ to cultures self-referentially crediting themselves with being ‘modern’ or ‘civilised’ – and often - monolingual… As I will return to at the end of this chapter, maintaining linguistic diversity may be as important for our survival as ecological diversity is for the survival of our species – indeed, we do (or should) meanwhile know that monocultures are much less resistant to the vagaries of internal and external ‘attacks’. Indeed, who knows what the growing reduction to one – albeit ‘imperial’ – idiom may ‘do’ to our brains/minds, our local/global relations of co-existence with what sustains us physically, socially, spiritually and indeed, as fully matured personal/social identities…?

But I’m jumping the gun… let me get to the main part of this chapter, my own multilingual life experience…

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In this rather non-academic contribution, I will trace back my personal multilingual story, indeed, the story of how I (and I’m sure many like me) became multilingual ‘naturally’ or ‘socially’, just by growing up in a relational reality which was linguistically diverse and which actively and structurally maintained such diversity. I will then retell the story of my meeting many other multilinguals and the joys associated with that encounter as a necessary feature of practical hospitality and reciprocity – indeed, a necessary feature of our realisation, embodiment and maintenance of a diverse commons as the sole solution for the predicaments our more or less peaceful sustainability on earth is now facing. In a last section I will conclude with some suggestions about how to counteract the homogenising – and thus the destruction – of linguistic diversity, especially where it is done – or ‘softly’ imposed - in the name of globalisation, improved communication and ‘efficiency.’

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Early multilingual experiences

The references to the Indigenous peoples of Australia and their linguistic prowess strangely transported me back to my childhood and growing up in Tongeren, a regional town in the southern part of the province of Limburg in the Flemish-speaking northern region of Belgium. Tongeren also has the distinction of being Belgium’s oldest town. Founded by the Roman legionnaires just before the last half century BCE as a reinforced military encampment protecting the area against potential invasions from across the rivers Rhine and Maas, it was referred to as ‘Atuatuca Tungrorum’ – literally, the ‘wall-ringed military camp of the Tungr’ (see nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atuatuca_Tungorum), the Tungr being the local Belgian-Germanic tribe. They had been installed there by Julius Caesar after he had defeated and dispersed the original ‘Belgae’ tribe of the Eburons and their leader Ambiorix, who initially had successfully resisted Roman colonisation by destroying two legions nearby. The town’s old fortifications are to a large degree still standing, as are many rather ancient reminders of times gone by, making the town both known as historically significant and – obviously - contributing a great deal to the identity of its inhabitants.

The local dialect, ‘Teungers’ – part of the Dutch-Flemish idioms of the Lower-Rhine and Maas region and, hence, more influenced by Rhinelandish-German – remains enthusiastically used and enjoys great interest from specialist dialect linguists, with several tomes of etymological research findings and dictionaries, cultural performances in song, theatre, poetry regular features in town. As well, since Tongeren is just five kilometres north of the linguistic border which divides Belgium into French and Flemish speaking now ‘federalised’ sections (about which in a moment!), the local dialect contains a generous sprinkling of French words, partly integrated into the local patois.

I started my aural and mental living experiences with two ‘local’ dialects resonating in my freshly-born ears: the local ‘Teungers’, spoken by my father’s family and ‘Achels’, ‘imported’ from the northern part of Limburg, about 45 K north-east of Tongeren, through my maternal grandmother, her husband the railway-station chief of Tongeren and their twelve children. My grandfather, being promoted, had moved his family to Tongeren from Achel, a village located at the Belgian-Dutch border, its
dialect characterised by less-guttural and ‘softer’ tonalities. As my mother remained sick in hospital for the first 1½ years of my life, I was mostly cared for during that time by my maternal grandmother and several unmarried aunts still living in her household… So, Achels, was the main idiom…

Later, as my mother’s health improved, she and I moved to my paternal grandfather’s house, where my family lived and where ‘Teungers’ was spoken – the Boulet family having lived in Tongeren continuously since the mid-1600s. So from a very young age, two distinct linguistic systems resonated for me and I’m quite sure that my first utterings were more influenced by my mother’s family’s dialect than by that of my father’s.

Thanks to regular phone calls and (less regular) family visits between Belgium and Australia, I remain almost fluent in ‘Teungers’ – even if I must miss out on all the neologisms which have continued to be absorbed in the dialect since my gradual departing over fifty years ago… Obviously, such absorptions of ‘foreign’ elements are part of the aliveness of all languages and dialects – even if the danger of dilution by the ‘soft’ imposition of other more ‘powerful’ (‘imperial’?) languages and, in the case of dialects, of the ‘official’ idiom of the country or linguistic region. As well, the arrival and settlement of ‘immigrants’ into the local space in which the dialects are spoken may gradually lead to the loss of specificity or even altogether to the disappearance of local dialects.

Since Belgium has had for a long time an almost total take-up of free-preschool/nursery/kindergarten attendance by all children from three to five/six years of age, entering the Catholic nuns-run nursery at three years of age brought me to learn the third variation of my ‘mother/father’-tongues, ‘official’ Flemish/Dutch (or as we then called it: ‘ABN’, acronym for Algemeen Beschaaft Nederlands… translating as General Civilised Dutch…). The Flemish variant of Dutch – whilst sharing all the grammatical and spelling intricacies of Dutch as spoken in the Netherlands and especially North of the ‘Moerdijk’ - is generally more pronounced in the palatal region of the mouth (whereas those living in the North tend to have adopted more guttural pronunciations).

So whilst all that was happening in my gradual socialisation into becoming a full member of the literate Flemish/Belgian community, some other factors intrinsic to the family I am part of certainly have made their linguistic impact felt. I already mentioned that my maternal grandmother had twelve children; one of those, the eldest daughter, Aunt Agnes, had married an English soldier, Uncle Alec, sometime after the First World War, and they had moved to the UK. They visited Tongeren once a year with their four sons, my cousins, so that my curious and receptive ears were rather early exposed to English to which I and my numerous other cousins (we were altogether 33) were invited to respond in kind. But according to my Uncle Alec, who had become a school headmaster (as well as playing the violin magnificently…), we needed to speak the Queen’s language ‘properly’ as he declared to be rather allergic to any trace of US-English he would spot in our tentative attempts to speak the King’s/Queen’s language. Of course, we had started to hear a lot of US-originated jazz, blues and pop on the radio and via the movies (Walt Disney, Bambi, of course, Laurel and Hardy, Cowboys and Indians, war movies about the evil Krauts and Japs and the always noble GIs, and many more); those movies always came with subtitles
rather than being dubbed, hence our propensity to – what Uncle Alec called – ‘Yankee doodle’…

There was a lot of singing in my young years, my father and mother being choir members and operetta enthusiasts; so our English family’s musical contributions fell in fertile grounds (‘… my bonnie is over the ocean…’ and ‘…a long way to Tipperary…’ were early favourites). Since my father’s mother descended from a French-speaking family from South of the linguistic border and my family has always been strongly supportive of the bi-lingual nature of Belgium, French songs were also part of the repertoire (‘…sur le pont d’Avignon…’ and ‘Frère Jacques, dormez-vous?’ being some of their contributions, the latter leaving me with some sort of early ambivalence, given that ‘brother Jacques’ could have been me, but what was I doing sleeping when I was supposed to be up and praying…?). My parents’ love of operettas and popular songs on the radio brought a lot of German sounds into our kitchen (Léhar, several of the Strauss families, Schubert songs …) in spite of their reservations about ‘Germans’ after two rather devastating World Wars and their aftermath …

But such are the ambiguities of growing up in a small place with lots of big neighbours…

The next addition to my childhood linguistic potpourri arrived as I turned six; in the late-1940s and early-1950s, Belgium was still almost wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling Catholicism, my family being rather devout adherents and my attending a Catholic nursery and later primary school, caused me to become immersed into Latin from a very early age, especially as I became an altar boy at six (every morning, at seven, serving at Mass), needing to learn all the responses to the priests’ recitations… Latin was then still Catholicism’s lingua franca… and it still would take another ten to fifteen years (after Vatican II, the great global attempt at bringing the Church into the present-day… the ‘aggiornamento’ as Pope John XXIII would call it… and the introduction of the liturgy in the languages of the people(s)…).

All the singing across languages amplified when I became a member of a boys’ choir just before turning seven, later graduating into the ‘men’s choir’ at the church where I also performed altar boy duties… So, at seven years of age, the sounds and tones and tunes of two dialects, my ‘official mother tongue’ and four other ‘official’ (even if one of those – Latin - was declared ‘dead’) European languages reverberated through my aural and increasingly written and spoken worlds – if not daily, then certainly regularly…

**Formal education enters the fray…**

Primary School then brought grammar, spelling, rote learning of vocabulary, creative writing, learning poems and prose reciting and memorising (also vast tracts from the Catholic Catechism, the ‘commandments’, the Articles of Faith and a great deal of prayers…) in ‘proper’ Flemish/Dutch, so that a growing understanding of the structure of the language started to take root – an indispensable component of the future consolidation and further acquisition of my own and other languages. School learning of French entered the curriculum somewhere along the primary school years,
again with a healthy emphasis on grammar and spelling and – of course – ‘vocab’ rote learning…

The subsequent six High School years added a veritable linguistic potpourri to my adolescent life: six years of classical Latin, five years of classical Greek, another six years of Dutch and French, three years each of English and German, all adding hefty doses of syntax and semantics to the understanding of grammar and spelling and the widening of active vocabularies. The last two years of the secondary curriculum introduced us systematically to classical writings in all six languages, opening up worlds of history, culture, philosophy and feasts of poetry, drama, rhetoric, novelistic… To this day, I can still recite pages of Homer and Virgil, but also Shakespeare (*Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears…*), Goethe and Schiller, the French *dramaturges* as well as poems of my favourite Flemish and French writers… Guido Gezelle, Alice Nahon, Pierre de Ronsard, Jean de la Fontaine…

Not a bad linguistic finishing school, I’d say, especially since, in my case, this *formal* learning was supported by all manner of ‘extra-curricular’ or ‘social’ activities:

- a multi-lingual family, choir, altar boy and later parish youth work;
- geographic proximity to other spoken languages: living five kilometres north of French-speaking and thirty kilometres east of German-speaking communities (the third official language of Belgium);
- turning on the radio and the (increasing!) likelihood of hearing English/US pop songs about 40%, with German, French and a sprinkling of songs in Italian or other European languages together another 30%, leaving – probably – about 30% for Dutch/Flemish ones (often translations of original foreign language songs anyway…);
- add operettas and opera in their original languages;
- reading a LOT across languages…

and the intricate mixture of the social and formal acquisition of multi-linguistic competencies as well as the capability to ‘think in’ the respective idioms and not get them all mixed up went its mysterious ways…

**Into adulthood**

So it should be of no real surprise that when the time to choose a ‘career’ and the post-secondary studies leading to it arrived, that my father suggested I become a teacher (I still remember him saying: ‘… three months of holidays per year and a job till the end of your life…’) and that I go for ‘philology’ since I ‘… was good at languages’… Given my relationship with my father (rather ‘meddling’…) and my lack of any clear idea as to what I should ‘go’ for – let alone what I should ‘become’ (‘career counselling’ was virtually non-existing at that time and it certainly hasn’t much improved since…) - I said ‘OK dad’ and ended up in Leuven, attending Belgium’s major and oldest (Catholic) university. I obediently undertook to study Germanic Languages – Dutch, German and English – and during the first year was to delve into a lot of philosophy, history, psychology and the study of all the many previous forms those languages had evolved through, which all meant to assure that
there would be a strong foundation to our further philological study and – most likely – teaching practice (although interpreting, diplomacy and ‘communications’ were then-emerging alternatives).

I did not like it…

I did enjoy the introduction into the thinking of ancient and modern philosophers, the invitation into the life of theoreticians, early psychologists and such more, but medieval Dutch and old-German and the idiosyncrasies of Shakespearean word uses just could not engage me at all – it probably also had to do with the rather unimaginative forms of teaching and the rather turbulent times the early sixties represented…. After half a year, I started to skip classes and instead attended information sessions on social issues, international events – readers probably will remember the crises erupting during the late fifties and early sixties in Belgium’s former colony, the Democratic Republic of the Congo; but also the enormous shifts taking place in the Catholic Church with the new pope, the already mentioned John XXIII, turning many of my assumptions about the ‘meaning of life’ and such quite upside down; and, especially, the early resistance again the US’ and other western countries’ war in Vietnam – altogether a heady mixture of ‘exciting’ things a young man of 18, finally away from the controlling eye of parents (especially that of his father), could get interested – and often involved – in.

So after that first year – which certainly did strengthen my understanding of the three languages I was studying, their syntax, their semantics and their grammatical and spelling quirks – I quit Philology and decided to shift to Social Work. My elder sister had become a social worker and worked in the mining area of Limburg, about thirty kilometres north of Tongeren. She was working with miners and their families, mostly migrants deriving from a plethora of countries and cultures, Polish, Greeks, Italians, Portuguese and Spanish, Yugoslavs and Turks. She would sometimes take me there to mix with her in the many dances and festivities which were organised by the government social services she was employed by. She had become close friends with Italian families and introduced me to them; I quickly understood how easy it was to join into their dialogues with a mixture of Latin and French and some creative addition of “…issimos” to the adjectives… and it was their comments of astonishment about my ‘gift’ of acquiring a language ‘prestissimo’ which for the first time made me wonder about that… Being able to speak in several languages had always felt just ‘normal’ and not ‘remarkable’, most likely because it was part of an everyday multi-lingual social life evolving seemingly unexceptionally…

In the course of my social work studies in Leuven, my interest in international development deepened and I went on study placement with the International Association of Building Companions, a voluntary (Christian) organisation which had come about after World War II in aid of the many millions of refugees from the Eastern parts of Europe. Volunteers from most European countries on (what we still then considered) the Western (and therefore ‘free’) side of the ‘Iron Curtain’ assembled every summer holiday to assist refugees in building their houses or to build social infrastructure meant to help ‘absorbing’ them in their new communities.

My task at placement was to assist a course coordinator in the practical preparation of volunteers (mostly from Catholic and other Christian organisations) intending to be
deployed in projects in the (then still so-called) ‘under-developed countries’. Given the nature of the organisation and the multiple nationalities of the volunteers, several European languages (variations of German, French, Dutch, Italian, English, occasional Spanish) were always and concurrently in use and most participants did possess multi-lingual capabilities, at least understanding all that was said in the ongoing cacophony of the various idioms and mostly also able to respond in kind… So again, multilingualism felt like a ‘normal’ property of the ‘relational system’ I participated in, most members being in the process of studying yet other languages, those of the countries and cultures they intended to immerse themselves in as volunteers. It was also my first experience of teaching (group work, cross-cultural work, community development) in another than my mother tongue: French, German and Dutch easily mixed into the flow of mutual exchanges, with occasional attempts at explicating certain concepts in Italian or English.

Venturing beyond Europe

In 1966, I left Europe to spend three years as a volunteer ‘development worker’ in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then, under Africanising President Mobutu, referred to as ‘Zaire’); I had become a pacifist, having participated in various demonstrations and other actions against the US’ and several other countries’ involvement in the Vietnam War and refused to do the 18 months of obligatory military service then still in force in Belgium. The alternative offered was a three years of voluntary work in a developing country; given my interest in the issue and my growing political commitment to international justice, I gladly embarked on what was to become the most foundational learning experience of my life. It would take too long to enlarge of the fullness of my learning during that time, so I will restrict myself to the language aspect of my engagement there.

I started to immerse myself in ‘Tshiluba’, the language spoken in most of the Kasai province in the central part of Congo/Zaire and one of the four main languages spoken in that country, Swahili, Kikongo and Lingala being the other three. Within each of those language groups, several major ‘dialects’ – many of those rather languages in their own right – are spoken, altogether about 80 across the country. Missionaries had long before started to write vocabulary, grammar, syntax of most main languages, imposing formal order on spoken language systems, attempting to give them a transmittable structure beyond the traditional oral mode and (presumably) ‘elevate’ them to civilisatory status (given that Western and other writing cultures usually equate the written word with the beginning of history and – thus – civilisation, forgetting that there are numerous other symbolic systems and representations which may hold groups of humans together across places and across times…).

And so it was for Tshiluba; I had a pretty good sense of the ‘logic’ of that language even before I left Belgium – mostly thanks to my previous experiences of having ‘drummed’ the importance of linguistic structure into my head during my High School years and even before. So, the prefix and affix changes which denote plurals, tenses, conjugations and declinations did easily stay with me and, together with the fact that most of the locals I worked with had only very rudimentary use of school-French (but often spoke at least one of the other major languages and/or several more local or regional idioms), I had to rely on Tshiluba for most of my daily communications. And about six months into my stay, I managed to run the farm and
the training centre I was co-responsible for quite well, allowing me to also visit the villages around the province from where our trainees derived and enter into sometimes rather dense conversations with the village elders and the rest of the people living there and who often only spoke their own as well as some neighbouring language(s) as previously indicated.

I later added a good understanding of Lingala to this, which did not prove that difficult as it had been ‘simplified’ by the Belgian colonizers to also serve as the military and administrative language and thus became somewhat of a national idiom, together with French, the major colonial ‘import’ (although it should be mentioned that a number of Congolese men – especially those who had been learning at Catholic missionary schools – also were capable of holding a good conversation in my native Flemish!). Lingala was (and still is) also used as the language of the popular songs for which Congolese artists have become famous across Africa – so, again, singing became the vehicle for language acquisition… And again, amongst missionaries, ‘expats’, the many volunteers in my own organisation and others working for the UN or for other NGOs, the multiplicity of other European languages continued to hold sway… one could often hear eight or nine different languages being spoken in a gathering of – say – twenty persons… I certainly never felt out of my multilingual element…

Returning ‘home’… sort of…

My return to Europe after three years included the to-be-expected anti-climax, but it also meant the continuation of multilingualism as well as the gradual loss of fluency in Tshiluba and Lingala; they are remaining somehow in my passive memory – as I discovered a few months ago, more than 40 years after my return from the Congo, when meeting a group of refugee Tshiluba speakers in a community centre in a Melbourne suburb; quite quickly they became available again when the occasion for speaking them occurred…

After the Congo experience, I spent one year in The Hague (Netherlands) involved in further study at the Institute for Social Studies, together with about 120 other participants from 80 different nationalities; the instructional language was English, but we were on-goingly involved in yet another multiplicity of idioms – especially Spanish and Portuguese and, of course, Dutch. Writing academic work in English was, however, a new acquisition for me and I travelled a few times to England to sit with my cousins, who helped me to get it ‘right’, another example of the really effective mixing of social and formal language acquisition, maintenance and on-going perfection. It also offered a first inkling of what I would experience about 15 years later in the US… the restrictions associated with certain languages to express the fullness of meaning a writer wants to convey to his/her readers…

The following ten years – the seventies - saw me working in (then ‘West-‘) Germany, becoming an academic, teaching in social work courses first in the southern capital of the Black Forest, Freiburg-in-Breisgau, and later in Kassel, where my task became the development of a pilot project-oriented curriculum for social work education. This lead to another form of further immersion in the various dimensions of language acquisition, leading to publishing a couple of books, chapters and articles as well as a series of tertiary education monographs associated with the curriculum development
job. However, I always attempted to stay in touch with the multiple other idioms I had been acquiring and using for much of my life. For nine years, a German publisher paid for me to attend the Frankfurt Book Fair to examine and take options on books on social work and welfare, community development and associated social sciences in the several languages I was able to read. This reviewer’s job certainly contributed to the deepening of my understanding of the various languages already acquired and added the Scandinavian languages group as well as more of Spanish, Italian and Portuguese to the variety and quantity (about 50 per year…) of books I was asked to examine as to their suitability for translation into German and for use in the academic and professional context of social work … I can only look back at that period with great gratitude for the opportunity given and the depth of learning I was privileged to get access to.

More interesting, however, remains for me to this day the fact that I never felt any inclination or wanted to exercise any pressure to pass on my multilingual ‘competencies’ onto my own family, for example, by asking that Flemish would also be spoken at home creating a ‘bi-lingual’ cocoon as happens in many mixed-language families. I met and married a German woman in the early seventies and never expected her to learn ‘my’ language… she did speak school and conversational French and English, the former enhanced by her Francophile dad sending his children to France on holiday exchanges and reciprocally welcoming their French counterparts to Germany.

My ease with German was such that I found it less cumbersome just sticking with that idiom rather than ‘have to’ get involved in my partner’s learning another language. And when our three children were born, I just did not see the point to expect it from them, somehow also afraid to appear being a ‘migrant father’ to them, speaking a language which they would never hear let alone speak in their daily interactions with friends, neighbours, their day-care family members. And when we would gather with members of my birth family – either when they were visiting us in Germany or us visiting them in Belgium – their Flemish aunts, uncles and cousins would easily engage them in their ‘mother’ tongue, German, because of the social and formal multilingualism they had acquired in Belgium and which I have described before …

Interesting… and puzzling as to what mixture of social, psychological and relational forces and dynamics comes into play in what is often so easily referred to as socio- or psycho-linguistics…

**The return of multilingualism … of a kind …**

And then, multilingualism – or at least bilingualism – re-appeared in my and my family’s social and formal speaking and learning environment, thanks to my partner’s insistence on maintaining German as the family idiom … and I’m now very glad she did…

We moved to the US in 1980, partly for me to complete my doctoral studies in Social Work and Sociology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, partly because my partner had developed a wish to also experience life ‘somewhere else’ and – probably – to experience a sense of the cosmopolitanism I had brought into her ‘orbit’ but which was also emerging gradually as ‘globalisation’… (Mexico had been an earlier
option but had then evaporated and the US seemed to offer an ‘easier’ and more readily accessible second choice – apart from the financial implications, of course…).

Living in family student housing on campus for five years certainly kept the sounds of many other languages alive, even if the local Lingua Franca became – as I before had my British uncle say – ‘Yankee doodle’ English with all the rich variety of pronunciations an international and US interstate collection of students and their families could assemble. Our children (two, four and five and a half years old as we arrived) acquired English in anywhere between six months and one year and the battle to maintain German at home was only then easy when we talked about something ‘outsiders’ were not meant to understand… (and it still is when our children, now parents themselves, want to keep secrets in the presence of their children or Australian ‘outsiders’…).

At university, I had my own (multi-)linguistic battles to fight… My ten years in German academia – especially spiced by the vigorous and invigorating debates about social change, revolutions, dialectics, contradictions, etc… - had assisted in my adoption of the rather complex German syntax: sentences of paragraph-length, a third of a page, with full use of the entire battery of conjugational possibilities: conditionals, conjunctives, sub-sentences, throw in a few adverbs and some qualifying adjectives, just to make sure the reader would ‘get’ the full complexity of the matter … of any matter… in all its shadings. Trying that in English did not sit well with the majority of my professors and tutors… It was a humbling experience for someone, who previously had written volumes in several languages, to be told (if not told-off) that my sentences were too long (‘… one thought per sentence and no longer than 1 ½ lines per sentence...’ was the message no-doubt helpful teachers regularly wrote under my essays…); my writing was too complex, if not confusing; saying complicated things ‘simply’ was the way to go, lest one would be suspected of wanting to sound ‘intellectual’, or worse, elitist…

My protests that complex things, processes, situations and contexts deserved – indeed, needed – complex modes of description and explanation (and could still be understandable…) did go no-where and I slowly learned to tame my expansive diction and still convey my thoughts comprehensibly (although the reader of this chapter will note that I haven’t reached the 1 ½ line or ‘one thought per sentence’ capability yet… sorry… probably never will).

Worse was that much of my emerging understanding of the dynamic nature of human and ecological relationships needed a vocabulary and the (re-)use of (English) language in forms which could more appropriately represent and express this fluidity. It was good to discover that I wasn’t alone with this difficulty – although I often felt alone when attempting to convey my ‘problem’ to colleagues and even to my thesis supervisors. Rather than further try and explain this particular ‘multilingual’ problem, let me offer an example and then go back to the main story… The English translation of an earlier work (1977:72) by the late French social scientist Pierre Bourdieu illustrates vividly what I was ‘up against’:

‘The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material existence characteristic of a class condition) produce habitus, systems of durable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures,
that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of an orchestrating action or a conductor.’

See what I mean…? I had read Bourdieu before in French and – partially – in German translations and thought that he made perfectly clear what had been a problem with the social sciences (and their language): the deep rift between social scientific understandings of the active and conscious ‘agents’ (or ‘subjects’) ‘producing’ certain forms of daily living and those understandings of the nature and workings of the ‘social context within which’ that happened (often conceived as ‘structures’ or ‘systems’). The first understandings required English to return to the verb to adequately express (human) agency, the latter needed to undo the objectification, reification, causal assumptions generated by positivism and quantification (and their uses for ‘state-making’) which was really all Bourdieu was suggesting. And newly emerging writing (Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman and David Bohm, to mention some English-writing authors of the time) certainly and equally pointed at the difficulty of language when attempting to bring more fluidity (or ‘liquidity’ as Bauman would call it) into and connections between these understandings…

But I had the greatest difficulties conveying all this to my thesis supervisors and several other professors who ‘assessed’ my course work… So, multilingualism does not automatically promise – let alone offer – a rose garden… not even for members of the academic middle classes… Indeed, as Karen Barad titles her 2007 book, we need to try ‘Meeting the Universe Halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning’ and it is not an easy thing to do…

But I did graduate with a ‘double’ PhD and a Dissertation full of ideas waiting to be further explored and put into practice… and which then only happened haltingly as I and my family immersed ourselves in yet another country and its society/societies.

Finally, Australia…

Our decision to stay in English-speaking territory had to do with a combination of reasons: our children had started their schooling, our oldest meanwhile finishing year five of Primary School and our youngest her first year and it then seemed better to not interrupt this learning process by moving (or returning) to another language; I was offered a tenured senior lecturership at the University of Melbourne; my partner – a social worker like myself – had somehow lost connection with the German ‘scene’ and would not mind staying in English-speaking territory; and a colleague at Michigan had several times been a visiting professor in Australia and was very positive about the political developments there (which, in the fifth year of ‘Reaganite’ neo-liberal developments in US was not surprising and which also was an argument for us to look for alternatives!) and she was supportive with references and such…

Again, everyday decisions which involve implications of a (multi-)linguistic kind are usually informed and conditioned by so many factors…
And 27 years later, we’re still here… still bi-lingual in conversations with our own children but obviously slowly losing the plot with their immersion in ‘in-law’ families, friends networks and jobs… all or mostly mono-lingual…

All of which brings me back to the first section of this chapter, where I was wondering about the lost potential of this country-continent, home to hundreds of (fast disappearing) Aboriginal languages, hundreds of still very much living languages from all over the world, brought here by millions of migrants, refugees, people of ‘CALD’ as I mentioned, and were very little attempts are made to ‘do’ anything with that treasure trove… or support its thriving… As I have tried to illustrate through the story of my and my family’s own meanderings, whilst circumstances do not quite conspire against creating and maintaining a multilingual living and communicative context, processes of systemic collusion seem to be at work which prevent its support. Call it lack of political will, or ethnocentrism or cultural domination or even – as I have intimated before – imperialism, growing monolingualism can be seen as part of the globalising impoverishment of our expressive forms and capabilities and of our active understanding of and support for diversity of meaning-giving and therewith our capability and opportunities of and for learning; as Fishman suggests:

‘The entire world needs a diversity of ethnolinguistic entities for its own salvation, for its greater creativity, for the more certain solution of human problems, for the constant rehumanization of humanity in the face of materialism, for greater aesthetic, intellectual and emotional capacities for humanity as a whole, indeed, for arriving at a higher state of human functioning’ (Joshua A. Fishman (1982) in Harrison, 2007:VII).

And Karen Barad, a Doctor in Theoretical Particle Physics, concludes her beautiful work as follows (2007:396):

‘Intra-acting responsibly as part of the world means taking account of the entangled phenomena that are intrinsic to the world’s vitality and being responsive to the possibilities that might help us flourish. Meeting each moment, being alive to the possibilities of becoming, is an ethical call, an invitation that is written into the very matter of all being and becoming. We need to meet the universe halfway, to take responsibility for the role that we play in the world’s differential becoming.’ (my emphasis)

Living in Australia – together with all its diversities, on-goingly creating a joint identity – could then resemble the way Cristina Beltrán (2010:168-170) approaches Latino identity, warning about the ‘Trouble with Unity’ (the title of her book):

‘… I have tried to approach Latinidad as a moment when diverse and even disparate subjects claim identification with one another. Such affiliations do not necessarily imply deep structure – they can be drawn from coordinates that are sometimes more cultural than ideological, more regional than partisan. Such connections might involve an emphasis on physiognomy and language rather than policy preferences… let us consider a more explicitly political understanding of identity: one that celebrates specificity, the political capacities of engaged localities and the possibility that human beings can be transformed through the shared practice of acting and speaking together.’

… and particularly when that speaking together is multilingual.
Concluding thoughts

Over time I have come to appreciate better, I think, what it would take to create and maintain a greater capability for multilingualism; and I share these thoughts with you, readers, as we do have to address issues such as these on many fronts…

- I emphasise the importance of combining the ‘social’ approach to learning (an)other (as well as one’s own!) language(s) with an understanding of their structure; after over 30 years of it being eliminated from language pedagogy, it is imperative to re-introduce the study of grammar, syntax and semantics so that it combines fruitfully with the so-called ‘natural’ method of language acquisition now most generally adopted across the Anglo-Saxon linguistic realm;
- It is imperative to combine memory-based rote-learning as well as the learning of poems, prose, drama, with ‘social’ and ‘real life’ modes of language(s) acquisition and with formal- and school-based learning; that will, obviously, require that teachers become capacitated to engage in such modes of teaching – again;
- A lot has already been written about how bi- and multilingualism has shown to delay the onset of Alzheimer’s disease and other mental ill-health conditions; rather than too much elaborate this rather utilitarian argument, I refer to Jared Diamond (2013:388 ff.) and meanwhile much other preventative, therapeutic and epidemiological writing;
- I would like you, dear reader, to imagine what multilingualism could mean for our general brain- and mind functions; giving meaning to matter (to use Barad’s coining) in different idioms would allow us to develop a healthy sense of ‘relativity’ and yes, even practical and affirmative tolerance, since one can ‘name’ the same ‘matter’ with different but complementary shadings of meaning; and I would love to see some good research about this;
- Some good theorising would be welcome about how our human relational capability would be enhanced through improved multilingual capacities – especially when they are realised as an expression of hospitality, reciprocity and respect, the new names Gustavo Esteva (1998) has suggested be used instead of those we usually apply when speaking to and of those we consider ‘less developed’ than ‘we’ are and who are – hence – thought to be in need of our English-spoken ‘input’…

So, appropriately, I would like to finish this chapter with Arundhati Roy’s exhortation to resist the onslaught of ‘empire’…

Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness – and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe.

Indeed and by using the multiple languages which suit us best to express those stories and to which others will listen (as we will listen to theirs), even if all will sometimes have to strain a bit to understand…
I do hope that this small contribution has somehow added to this necessary confrontation with empire… even if it had to be written in the language of empire…
References

Endnotes

i Borrowed from *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, a 1964 semi-autobiographical novel of a teenage girl's battle with schizophrenia by Joanne Greenberg; a 1977 film and a 2004 play based on the novel as well as a song written by Joe South; indeed, there is some schizophrenia at work in the multilingual field of living…

ii (3 years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, one year in the Netherlands, ten years in Germany, five in the US and those nineteen years ‘book-ended’ – first - by 23 years in Flemish Belgium and now - since 27 - years as a ‘permanent resident’ in Australia, interspersed with considerable periods of time spent in Hong Kong and several international research trips in Africa, Latin America and Asia…)

iii The Borderlands Cooperative (see www.borderlands.org.au) adopted its name from the late Gloria Anzaldúa’s remarkable book ‘Borderlands – La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987, Aunt Lute Books)’ - ‘A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los Atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal."’ And that probably does include the multilingual, those who can express their emotions and their thoughts in many more or less appropriate ways.

On another occasion she wrote: “Why am I compelled to write?... Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and anger... To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit... Finally I write because I'm scared of writing, but I'm more scared of not writing.”

iv The separation between the (Germanic) Dutch/Flemish linguistic region and the (Romantic) French runs along the over 2,000 years old Roman commercial and military road which ran (and is still partly visible) between the northern French town of Bavai and the German City of Cologne. This road connected with another road to Paris and had a ‘feed’ from the North Sea/Atlantic coast allowing transports from Rome to avoid the crossing of the Alps and come by boat surrounding the Southern part of Europe along the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean seaboards and then via road transport to the border with what is now Germany and which was then a precarious separation between ‘invading’ German tribes and ‘settled’ Roman colonisers and the military protecting them. To the North of this road, Roman colonisation did not penetrate as profoundly as it did to its South, because of its swampy terrain and the resistance of the original ‘Belgian’ tribes. When then the German tribes successively invaded after CE 400, their languages remained dominant and eventually crystallised into Flemish/Dutch, whilst the areas to the South adopted Vulgaris Latinus as their Lingua Franca, later evolving into French.

v The river Rhine and Maas (often referred to as the ‘Moerdijk’, or the dyke which prevented the waters of these rivers from flooding the country) divide the Netherlands (‘Holland’) in two sections with rather marked cultural, religious and linguistic idiosyncrasies even if the differences have tended to diminish over time because of migration, education and general processes of social change. Still, the southern provinces of Limburg, Noord Brabant and Zeeland remain quite distinct and their culture as well as linguistic characteristics resembling more closely those of the cross-border neighbouring Flemish/Belgian provinces. The differences between the North and the South in Holland date back to the 15th Century but – unfortunately! – cannot be examined in this chapter.

vi I rather also not go into the story of the often stormy relationship between French-speaking and Flemish-speaking Belgium… any good modern history book or Encyclopaedia will devote many pages to that story albeit not always with the necessary subtlety and neutrality and understanding…