



A SNEAK PEEK AT THE FUTURE OF WHAT WE HAVE GOT USED TO CALLING (A) LANGUAGE

UMA PRÉVIA DO FUTURO DO QUE NOS ACOSTUMAMOS A CHAMAR DE (A) LINGUAGEM

Kanavillil Rajagopalan¹

Resumo: Neste texto, pretendo deixar correr solta a minha imaginação a fim de tecer algumas ponderações sobre o que o futuro nos resguarda no que diz respeito à(s) língua(s). Assumo essa tarefa confessadamente arriscada com base em palpites razoavelmente bem-fundamentados e pistas bastante confiáveis sobre o que de fato transcorre no mundo real. Começando com a premissa de que o que chamamos de língua e de línguas não passa de reflexos semióticos e seus subprodutos de dadas configurações geopolíticas, pleiteio que o cenário geopolítico de alta rotação e de transformações radicais em curso na forma como o mundo se encontra configurado e sendo reconfigurado constantemente devem nos fornecer motivo de pausa para pensar e voltar ao tabuleiro no intuito de repensar os rumos. Deve nos propiciar uma ideia do que nos espera em frente, num futuro não tão-distante. Esses voos especulativos de imaginação têm, como pretendo arguir, a capacidade de liberar as nossas mentes e prepará-las para lidar com as mudanças drásticas, muitas das quais ainda muito além dos nossos mais estapafúrdios sonhos que sinto estarem no virar da esquina em termos de linguagem.

Palavras chave: Futuro da língua(gem); ‘God’s truth’ vs ‘Hocus pocus’; ‘coisificação’ de referentes; geopolíticas em transição

Abstract: In this text, I propose to let my imagination run riot about what the future has in store regarding language(s). I undertake this admittedly risky task on the basis of an educated guess and already available clues from what is actually going on. Starting from the premise that what we call language(s) are semiotic reflexes and their by-products of historically given geopolitical configurations, I claim that the fast-changing geopolitics as well as the sweeping changes under way in the way the world is currently configured and constantly being reconfigured must give us cause for pause and reason to opt for a major rethink. It must give us a foretaste of what awaits us down the line in regard to what language, in a not-too-distant future, seems destined to look like. Such speculative flights of imagination have, as I shall argue, the capacity to free up our minds and get them prepared to deal with radical changes, many of which as yet far beyond our wildest dreams that I feel are just around the corner language-wise.

Keywords: Future of language; God’s truth vs ‘hocus pocus’; ‘thingifying’ referents; named languages; shifting geopolitics

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

Linguistics has a long history of discouraging or, if you will, summarily suffocating any discussion on matters where adequate empirical evidence was notoriously in short supply. For example, in 1866, the Linguistic Society of Paris (Société de Linguistique de Paris) peremptorily issued, as it were, a gag order against any speculation regarding the million-dollar question of the origin of language. As with the origin of language, so with

¹ Professor Titular da Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Unicamp, Campinas, SP, Brasil.
rajagopalan@uol.com.br
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3877-4936>

the future of language. There is, it would seem, a widespread tendency to look askance at any attempt to speculate about what language(s) may look like in the future, unceremoniously dismissing the issue as a shot in the dark or, at best, a wild goose chase.

In what follows, however, that is precisely what I propose to do, bucking the trend. I do it for the reason that (a) I think the time is ripe for us to engage in such a discussion no matter how foolhardy it might appear to many and (b) sporadic and informal discussion is already running rife among the lay public as well as many discerning observers of the unfolding scenario, especially in light of unmistakable omens giving us a foretaste of things to come.

Before any of my readers raises their eyebrows at the rather rambling, essayistic style deliberately adopted in this text, let me justify my choice of the style of presentation on the grounds that I make no claim of producing what many would consider a rock-solid, scientifically rigorous argument in what follows. Rather, its thrust is admittedly speculative and hypothetical and is based, I would insist, on some educated guesses that around half a century of working with language in various capacities entitles me to make. I would also justify my stance on the strength of my conviction that genuine progress in science also requires occasional imaginative leaps into as yet murky territories in the black holes our field of enquiry.

THE GENERAL SETTING AND BACKGROUND TO THE ENSUING DISCUSSION

In the past decade or two, there has been a spate of published material – newspaper articles, discussions in readers’ columns, and so forth – all speculating about what the future holds for languages as we know them today or think we know them. Both the experts and the lay people have evinced enormous interest in and curiosity on the topic. True, most academic linguists fight shy of venturing into the murky area of making predictions about what language may ultimately evolve into. But, not infrequently, some scholars (cf Borghi, 2020; Graddol, 1997) have made bold forays and come up with educated guesses on the topic that merit our attention. The speed with which Artificial Intelligence (AI) is taking over many of our domestic and routine chores is often seen as leaving mankind at a crossroads with respect to one of our most cherished and defining possessions, namely language, and what the future may have in store for it. While much of this chatter borders on the sensational, alarmist, or doomsday-mongering, there is also some cause for genuine concern. Judging by what is happening right in front of our eyes, we can make some wild guesses as to what we are headed language wise.

A CAUTIONARY NOTE TO START OFF WITH

Not being in possession of a crystal ball, divining the future of languages or, in our case, the future of language (with no preceding article) is always a risky business. It can be either an innocent parlour game or a futile effort at empty woolgathering. Irrespective of whether it turns out be one or the other, I propose to plunge into it in the paragraphs that follow. I do this because the prospects I see strike me as at once mind-boggling and exciting (Rajagopalan, 2019). And, to tell you the truth, frankly agreeable – to my taste at least.

THE 'ENTITY' WE CALL LANGUAGE: SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

In a thought-provoking paper titled 'How real are linguistic entities?', Moulder (1993) comments on a distinction, facetious in tone but serious in its consequences, made between "two attitudes in linguistics" referred to as 'God's truth' and 'hocus pocus' respectively. The former, the God's truth linguist, believes that language has a structure, independently of whether or not the linguist or anyone else ever comes to discover it. The focus pocus linguist, on the other hand, is merely interested in having some fun playing around with symbols, for they do not believe that language as it presents itself to us is already prepackaged with structure or whatever and it is we who impute structure to language in order to satisfy our sweet will and pleasure. In the following excerpt, Moulder (1993: 141) enthusiastically cites Joos (1958)

According to Martin Jones, editing *Readings in Linguistics*, the 'hocus pocus' linguists may well share the 'God's truth' faith that the language in question has its own structure, but "the conclusion that the structure is accessible to frontal attack is for him a non-sequitor."

As interesting as I indeed find it, what has often intrigued me about this battle of wits is that both parties seem to at one in respect of the one presupposition that stands out from the tussle: namely, there are such things as languages to begin with. Furthermore, both parties seem to be fully at ease with the idea that not only do languages exist out there as real-world entities, they also are amenable to inspection by anyone (well, there may be some disagreement as to how reliable our findings in this regard may reveal themselves to be), should they care to do so.

Now, I feel somewhat embarrassed to confess that I have had serious reservations on this issue for longer than I can remember. That too, after all these years devoting my time and energies researching into the workings of language and the enigmas they constantly throw up. I still find myself reeling, after all these years, from the shock of reading Donald Davidson and his oft-quoted cluster bomb of a statement:

I conclude that there is no such as a language, not if language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and apply to cases. Davidson, 1986: 446)

Now, over the years, scholars who have put their noses to the grindstone with a view to figuring out what exactly Davidson was getting at. On my part, I am inclined to think that what the late Berkeley professor was proclaiming loud and clear was, among other things, a stark reminder to all and sundry that it is all too easy to jump from the premise that we can and do speak about languages to the glib conclusion that there must be such things as languages to begin with. Simply put, the very possibility to be able to speak about something must, in and of itself, guarantee that thing's prior existence! This is clearly a *non-sequitur*. Were it not so, we would be fully authorized to infer when we hear someone exclaim "Gosh" that he or she is invoking the name of God Almighty or that they are fully committed to His very existence!

But even many well-established logicians and philosophers have unwittingly let themselves to walk straight into this trap. How else should one interpret Dummet's (1986) celebrated rejoinder to Davidson to the effect that there would be no other way to recognize, let alone explain, such phenomena as linguistic discrimination, persecution and so forth? Dummet is claiming, in other words, there can be no linguistic discrimination or persecution unless there is something called language already in place.

By the same token, there can be no such thing as racial discrimination unless the existence of race is a fact already proven independently and antecedently. Since it is a proven scientific truism that race does not exist as a biological category, there can be no racial discrimination either.

With all due respect to the unquestionable philosophical credentials of the late English philosopher, I beg to submit that I find his objection a non-starter because I firmly believe that simple reference does not *eo ipso* guarantee the previous existence of the object referred to – as it seems crystal clear to me from the example of God and His existence just cited. Rather, all too often it seems to me to be the case that you literally bring into being (at some level of existence) something just by referring to it, by naming it.

One does not have to be a poet to do that. The famous lines from Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' that read

“The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact:
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,
That is, the madman: the lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.”

attest to the point being made here. We can and often do 'thingify' things by referring to them. To put it more tersely in the technical language that we linguists are more comfortable with, the terms we employ in our metalanguage have the power of reifying the objects we refer to by means of the use of very terms in question. Alternatively, contrary to what we may be tempted to think, the phenomenon of reference does not operate exclusively in a backward-looking fashion, it can also function, and often does function, in a forward-looking fashion. What I therefore wish to claim here is that 'language' itself is such a term in the hands of the linguist. The metalinguistic use of the term 'language' does the miracle of bringing to life the object to which the name apparently refers (that is to say, 'refer' in the more widely recognised sense of that term). Or, if you like, linguistic reference works, as just noted, prospectively just as well as retrospectively (for all you know, even more so than we have been told to believe) in order to, in Shakespeare's words, "give[s] to airy nothing a local habitation and a name."

Now, the fact that the term 'language' succeeds in referring to an entity called language does not confer upon it any *de re* status, only a *de dicto* one at best. Although, many of us will have no problem concurring with this point, we overlook this elementary piece of truth at our own peril and at the risk of derailing any further chain of thought that may use it as a launching pad.

LANGUAGE VS LANGUAGES

As linguists, we have got so accustomed to distinguishing between looking at language in the abstract versus looking at language in its 'concrete' (countable?) sense, that it may seem overly punctilious or fastidious to add an important rider to the very first statement made in the foregoing paragraph. But as Khokhlova (2014) has very astutely pointed out "[d]espite centuries of studying abstract nouns, linguists have failed to come

to unanimous understanding of this category, but agree on the ambiguity of the term and the concept itself” (Khokhlova, 2014: 8). Such rough and ready rules of thumb as that “words, which denote material objects, visible and tangible, are concrete, while words referring to notions and things, which cannot be touched or sensed in any other way, are deemed abstract” only lead to further intractable conundra when confronted with words like *mermaid*, *unicorn* and *centaur* which “are unanimously identified as concrete yet are not real or tangible.” (Khokhlova, 2014: 10).

With respect to the word *language*, it would seem that the mere absence of a preceding – and, in this case, indefinite — article is no guarantee that the word in question is to be considered abstract or concrete. The fact of the matter is that, although we all agree in our more sober moments that both language and languages are immaterial objects, we often do treat them as though they were. This verbal prestidigitation (intentional or otherwise) often passes off innocuously, but has no doubt important ramifications when the discussion itself is centred around it. However, all we can do for the time being is take a note of this inconvenient detail and get on with our musings, lest we should get bogged down and fail to do justice to what we had set out to do.

A BRIEF, DIGRESSIVE NOTE ON ‘NAMED LANGUAGES’

The term ‘named languages’ is, to the best of my knowledge, a fairly recent one. It remained, so I believe, a widely recognized phenomenon for a long time, but one in dire need of an appellation. That need became more and more urgent when the realization dawned on many field linguists that languages existed long before they were named or independently of whether or not they were named. Furthermore, if you agree with Lamb “it is actually impossible to define languages as distinguishable objects” (Lamb, 2004 [1986]: 394), language (in its generic, non-individuating sense) must itself have been the product of naming, the first explicit sign of what we would today call our metalinguistic awareness.

It was certainly not in common usage in the mid-1960s when I started my first incursions into the world of modern linguistics. I suspect that when sociolinguists started using the term, it was meant to draw attention to the social, political, ethnic self-identification of specific groups of speakers. These speakers must have at some point decided to give their ‘lingo’ “a local habitation and a name” – thereby literally bringing their language into existence and, in so doing, claim an identity all their own. For every named language, there must be scores or even hundreds of others condemned to live on the margins of existence, for lack of patronage and political will. This is precisely the reason why the entry on ‘Indian languages’ in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indian-languages>) reads: “Of the hundreds of languages spoken in India, 22 are mentioned in the constitution of India.” What counts, thus, is the official recognition of the name – other candidates with no such backing are either treated as empty monikers or mere ‘dialects’ of their prestigious cousins!

NAMED LANGUAGES WHEN SEEN AS HOLDING A MIRROR UP TO THE WORLD YONDER

Setting aside the important point made above about the capacity of language not only to reflect features of the world ‘out there’ but occasionally also to project new features onto it, it is not all that difficult to concede that every time the reality out there

changes, so will its reflection in the mirror. The simulacrum is by its nature volatile and responds to the minutest changes in what it seeks to represent.

It is therefore worth the while to engage in some imaginative foraging into what our forefathers must have had in their minds as they mulled, indeed brought into being the metalinguistic concept of language and kept tweaking it constantly in order to make it fulfill its mirroring role. At the beginning of our story, our protagonist had no idea of language, they just spoke it. The first signs of metalinguistic awareness (or should we rather call it ‘awakening’) when they first bumped into someone that looked like them, moved liked them, otherwise behaved like them, but spoke in a way that sounded total gibberish to their ears. Their first impression that the stranger before their eyes was a vertebrate that belonged to another species must slowly have given way to the realization that the being did belong to the same species as they – and, lo and behold, this must have been the eureka moment that what they spoke was a language different from the one the stranger was speaking.

Fast forward a few millennia and we have a scenario where the early migratory movements of our human ancestors have already spread all across the globe, taken possession of the stretches of land they found themselves in, called them different countries, each with its own ‘distinctive language’, a trend that reached its pinnacle in the 19th century, as the historians tell us. From then on, the named languages became the badge of each nation, something worth fighting and dying for.

HOW THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICS OF THE WORLD IMPACTS NAMED LANGUAGES AND THEIR IDENTITIES

Named languages have their identities forged and consolidated, thanks to the politics of power play engaged in by nations in accordance with the geopolitics of specific moments along the march of history. Needless to say, both the geopolitics and the power plays change from time to time. What this goes to show is that shifting winds in geopolitics have immediate repercussions on the linguistic situation at the grassroots level. A case in point is the nomenclatural trajectory of the language that the now-defunct state of Yugoslavia once touted as their national language. As the federation broke up, the six nations that made up the republic—to wit, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia (including the regions of Kosovo and Vojvodina) and Slovenia — went each their own way. In the process, each named their language anew. In its April 10, 2017 edition

(<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/04/10/is-serbo-croatian-a-language>), *The Economist* published an article entitled ‘Is Serbo-Croatian a language? Or is it actually four distinct tongues?’ This is how it presented the key question in its opening paragraph:

Some 17m people in Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro speak variations of what used to be called Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian. Officially though, the language that once united Yugoslavia has, like the country, ceased to exist. Instead, it now has four names: Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian and Montenegrin. But are these all the same language?

And the text went on to provide an answer to the question it had itself posed:

The answer, according to a group of linguists and NGOs from the four countries, is a resounding “yes”. Working under the banner of a project called “Language and Nationalism”, the group issued a “declaration on the common language” on March 30th. It stated that the four tongues together form a “polycentric” language, similar to English, German or Arabic. They argue that while

different dialects exist, these are variations of the same language since everyone who speaks it can understand one another.

The verbal gymnastics employed in dealing with such a delicate question is fully understandable. The truth of the matter is that we often tend to overlook the fact that individual, named languages have their identities delineated and consolidated only in response to prevailing geopolitical interests. It only stands to reason that language itself, meaning thereby our very idea of what constitutes a language, only makes sense when considered against the backdrop of such interests and, furthermore, must constantly change in tandem with the changing geopolitical trends.

THE INTERNET, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE FUTURE PROSPECTS – HOW LANGUAGE WILL FARE AMIDST ALL THIS

One thing that is becoming increasingly clear to those of us who are willing to take stock of the ongoing developments, armed with a mindset, painstakingly rid of the weight of tradition and its cumbersome shackles is that, even as we speak, the language (to continue using a term for want of a better one) we employ is a far cry from what it must have sounded like or appeared to be to our elders. It is probably no exaggeration to point out that never before in history has what is best described as ‘waywardness,’ an ‘I-don’t-care-two-hoots-what-others-might-think-of-all-this’ approach, been so glibly acceptable in our ways speaking and writing – and in our very attitude to adhere to the norms of usage in matters of language use.

One clear sign of what we are looking at is clearly noticeable tendency to bring the written language closer and ever closer to the spoken one. The poet and the peasant (cf Mey, 1987) have never been speaking to each other so freely, unencumbered by questions of social status or the linguistic privileges that, in the past, used to accrue from them. In a sense, this was always already there as a trend in the making, as modern linguistics recognised very early on, as it took on traditional grammarians and chastised them for confusing grammaticality with mannerly use of language. Whether they themselves were any more successful in not falling into the same trap is most likely a moot point. What neither side probably failed to notice at that time was that the line that separated the wheat from the chaff was, irrespective of the specific considerations brought to bear on the topic, embarrassingly porous and destined to remain so, insofar as the passage from one to the other was always a distinct possibility, as indeed the passage of time has evidenced time and time again (Needless to point out, this realization was prevented from dawning upon those who had willingly opted to leave out history through the ingenious artifice of treating the present as a frozen moment, thereby promoting synchrony at the expense of diachrony). But let us not be distracted from our central concern here.

Going back to how people at large go about using language in our times, it seems to be undeniably the case that the rules of the game have changed dramatically. We feel more and more free to flout language rules and norms of ‘linguistic etiquette’ in order to satisfy our need to express ourselves, to ‘speak our minds’ as it were. Self-styled guardians and gate-keepers of ‘good’ usage no longer call all the shots as they used to. Much to the chagrin of the old guard, ordinary language users have taken upon themselves the right to challenge arbitrarily imposed norms of linguistic etiquette that they rightly perceive as symptomatic of such toxic ideologies as racism, misogyny, homophobia and so forth. Witness, for instance the abandon with which everyday users feel free to adhere to the use of singular ‘they’ and other gender-neutral ways of tackling the vestiges of such

noxious ideologies. If need be, they do it at the cost of bending – indeed, defiantly thumbing their noses at — the traditionally revered prescriptive and proscriptive injunctions (more so, perhaps, in the case of the latter – cf. Pavey, Louisa; Chruchill, Susan and Sparks, Paul, 2022)

Like never before, we feel emboldened and, why not, indeed authorized, to use nonce words and expressions we deem fit – the only limit being whether or not we manage it get is across to our interlocutors. In short, we, especially the younger generations amongst us, are entirely happy and at ease with ourselves and our new-found laissez-faire attitude to the way we use language. If we cannot find an adequate word for exactly what we wish to say, well, *invent* one. What is ‘sayable’ in language has become synonymous with whatever we can splutter and ‘get away with’. The ultimate proof, or the litmus test, of what is permissible and what is not by way of acceptable language use is, in other words, how it is received by one’s interlocutors. The whole burden proof, in other words, shifts from the illocutionary to the perlocutionary – to borrow the terminology of the speech acts theory.

FOR A FLEETING MOMENT, A GLIMPSE OF WHAT THE FUTURE MAY HOLD FOR LANGUAGE

To be sure, the random thoughts gathered in the foregoing paragraphs need a lot more in-depth exploring than undertaken here, but I believe they do help make a reasonably robust case for arguing that, the way things are beginning to take shape, what we call language today is a lot unlike what will come to take its place in a not too distant future (by all means, neither the present writer nor any of the current readers of this piece will likely bear witness to its coming into being). Among the hallmarks of this phenomenon-in-waiting will be its seamless continuity with what are today considered its distinct, named ‘neighbours’, and also the other semiotically distinguishable means of self-expression and communication. Most likely too, any remaining liaison among conceptual entities such as ‘nation,’ ‘people,’ ‘language’ and so on that we inherited from the 19th century imagination, will have become a thing of the past and part of, might we say, the archeology of our thinking about language.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to the CNPq for funding my research through grant no. 300991/2019-3.

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Recebido: 15/5/2023
Aceito: 28/8/2023
Publicado: 19/10/2023