DISCUSSION ARTICLE
What Kind of Values Do Languages Have? Means of Communication and Cultural Heritage*

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What kind of goods are languages? Why languages matter? At first glance, it may sound a quite obvious topic, but debates on linguistic diversity and linguistic justice raise the issue of language's value. As long as discussions have been particularly concerned, since the nineties, with problems of language extinction, or the protection of minority languages, they confront us with questions about why and to what extent languages are valuable.

Unfortunately, as advocates of endangered languages pay more attention to practical problems about what should be done to protect languages in danger, or lesser-used languages in general, and thus preventing the loss of linguistic diversity, the answer has been too often taken for granted. And when the question is explicitly addressed we find all kinds of reasons (Nettle and Romaine 2000, 10–23; Toscano 2006). Nonetheless, there are certain benefits in discussing the issue theoretically at an abstract level: first, we get more clarity about value questions concerning linguistic diversity; and second, we get an overall picture of the topics at stake.

Accordingly, two kinds of value can be discerned in linguistic diversity debates: 1) Language as a *means of communication*, 2) language as *cultural heritage*. In this article I will examine both language values, or value dimensions. Since we have good explanations on language's communicative value, I will pay particular attention to the

latter, exploring how we understand the idea of cultural heritage as applied to languages and the intrinsic value associated to them under this description. We could add a third value dimension: language as an identity marker, but it really plays a minor role, subsidiary to the cultural heritage. Besides, the notion of identity used both in ordinary language and in the social sciences deserves an independent treatment (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

Furthermore, it is very instructive to note the rhetorical uses of these value descriptions in linguistic diversity discourses. I suggest that the argumentative patterns used in debates about language policy and linguistic diversity typically highlight one of the values at the expense of the other. The main line of division can be traced between those who view language as a conventional communication tool and those who see each language as a unique cultural heritage of paramount importance for their speakers' identity (De Schutter 2007, 8–13).

What is at stake here is not the true nature of language, but the relative importance of those features. In fact, the key issue has to do with the normative implications that can be drawn from each value concerning the two major linguistic diversity questions: whether languages have an equal worth, despite their differences regarding the number of speakers; and how to assess the process of language shift, or "language death" as is often called.

Communicative value

It is a truism that languages serve people to communicate and thus are useful for all kinds of purposes and activities. Through language we perform all kinds of communicative actions, from asking for directions, or ordering at in a restaurant, to claiming our rights or writing poetry. Borrowing the words of John Rawls about primary goods, languages are all-purpose social means for their speakers.

So considered, proficiency in a language, i.e. the knowledge and related skills, is an asset for individuals. It can be seen as a sort of *human capital* (Breton 1998) according to this economist's definition: the stock of skills and knowledge acquired by a person through learning and experience to improve her productivity. We do not need to take this enhancement in a narrow economic view, in terms of increased

income, but in a broad sense as the more efficient pursuit of all kinds of goals and aims (Breton 1978, 662).

That seems to be plain for scholars, who typically make a significant time and study investment improving their native tongue skills, but also learning other languages to enlarge their language repertoire. Mother tongues can be seen as forms of inherited capital, but the acquisition of greater proficiency through education, for instance perfecting writing skills, is an investment just like learning a second language. There may be great differences in the required amount of time and effort between one's mother tongue and second or third languages, but in any case the investment is oriented to the expected payoff derived from this sort of knowledge and abilities inasmuch as they open a wider range of exchanges and opportunities.

Obviously, there may be huge differences in the expected benefits from learning a language L_a rather than another L_b because of the increased opportunities for communication and exchange that offers L_a compared with L_b. So, being proficient in L_a turns a more valuable asset than being proficient in L_b. Hence, *ceteris paribus*, we can expect that more people invest in learning L_a than L_b. Surely we see this more clearly in the case of learning a foreign tongue as second language. Why do people learn English as a second language today, or why do they want their children to learn it? The answer is patent: as the global *lingua franca* nowadays, English has the greatest potential for communication and exchange across the world, and thus for those who learn it, English offers benefits higher than the ones provided by other languages. A general pattern can be discerned: given the costs of learning and mastering a foreign language, its choice is guided by its communicative potential. The speaker typically wants to enlarge her language repertoire adding languages with a communicative value equal or higher to her native tongue (Calvet 1999, 76–81).

But how is it possible to measure the communicative potential of a given language? Probably the most elaborate available answer is Abram De Swaan's proposal (2001). According to the Dutch sociologist, the communicative value of a specific language, also called "Q value", must be understood as the product of two factors: the prevalence and the centrality of the language in a given language constellation. The prevalence of a language L_a is defined as the proportion of speakers of L_a in the language constellation, i.e., the number of competent speakers of L_a, divided by all the speakers in this area.

But this ratio (how many people are proficient in the language) is not sufficient to determine the Q value of L_a. We have to take into account the centrality of L_a in the language constellation, meant as the proportion of its multilingual speakers. More precisely, it is defined as the number of speakers of L_a proficient in other languages, divided by all the multilingual speakers in the language constellation. Thus, the centrality of L_a measures how it is connected with other languages through its multilingual speakers. In short, the more speakers of L_a, the more opportunities for direct communication L_a offers; and the more multilingual speakers of L_a, the more chances for indirect communication through translators and interpreters (De Swaan 2001, 33–34).

This way we can also see languages as communication networks. Instead of focusing on the competence of the speakers as an individual asset, we emphasize language's social nature as a collective good. Indeed, considered as a social phenomenon, each language is a complex set of communicative conventions and practices that grow as a spontaneous order in a human population. A social communicative convention for resolving coordination problems among individuals, a language is a collective good for all who know and use it. More precisely, a language typically meets the properties of *public goods*: non-excludability and non-rivalry in consumption. In this regard it is worth noting, incidentally, that languages share the usual problems of collective action and social dilemmas concerning public goods.

One feature of languages as collective goods is particularly interesting when examining their communication value. Unlike private goods, a public good has the property of non-rivalry because the consumption of a user in no way detracts from the consumption of others. In the case of languages we must go one step further, for new users do not diminish but increase their value. So, languages display a key feature of communication networks, i.e. positive network externalities: the more people join the network, the more useful it becomes. Adding new speakers does not reduce the value of the language; rather, it increases its communicative value (Church and King 1993, Dalmazzone 2000).

Roughly speaking, the communicative value of the network relies to a large extent on the network's size, but not only. A widespread language offers more opportunities for communication, including a

wide range of goods and services based on language. The larger a network becomes, the more easily it attracts users from other, particularly smaller, networks. And the more speakers of other languages it attracts, the more central a language becomes.

To sum up, languages are "hypercollective goods", as De Swaan says to explain that they are public goods with network effects (2000, 27). The problems around the coexistence of languages in contact spring from this very feature, which has no comparable effects in other forms of cultural diversity. Two consequences can be drawn from the fact that languages are hypercollective goods: first, there are huge differences among languages concerning their communicative value; and second, that explains why two languages sharing the same social space compete with each other, being usually the result that large languages gain speakers to the expense of small languages (Laponce 1987, 2006). This drift is a good instance of the famous "Matthew effect" coined by Robert K. Merton (1968).

The main issues about the competition of languages have to do with such differences in communicative value. As we have seen, this is a critical feature to explain why some languages decline, while others grow at their expense in the process of language shift, whose end outcome would be the disappearance of the minority language. But differences in communication value also raise interesting questions of fairness about the unequal exchanges between speakers located in different communicative networks; for example, about how the costs of such mutually beneficial exchanges are distributed among the speakers; or the position of comparative advantage enjoyed by the native speakers of a lingua franca (Van Parijs, 2003, 2007; Robichaud 2005). However, issues regarding problems of justice among speakers have received much less attention in discussions on linguistic diversity than the fate of endangered or lesser-used languages.

Cultural heritage

The linguistic diversity debates stress another kind of language value and present languages as a particularly valuable collective heritage. Indeed, this is the most important justification used in defense of endangered languages and the protection of the less-spoken languages. As we shall see, different reasons given in their defense

can be understood under the general heading of "value as collective heritage". And one may wonder whether the use of such description of a language's value as heritage is intended to establish a clear contrast with, and make a difference in relation to, its communicative value.

In the "death of languages" literature, justifying the value of languages in terms of collective heritage has become commonplace. If we review the literature, a variety of claims present languages under this value description. Consider the following examples. In a groundbreaking article Michael Krauss explained why the extinction of any language is an irretrievable loss, just like the extinction of any animal species:

> Surely we linguists know, and the general public can sense, that any language is a supreme achievement of a uniquely human collective genius, as divine and endless mystery as a living organism (Krauss 1992, 8).

Krauss' article appeared in a monographic issue of *Language*, the journal of the Linguistic Society of America, which pioneered the discussion on endangered languages. In his article, Ken Hale, the volume editor, wrote about the "treasure" that languages represent as "the priceless products of human mental industry":

> Of supreme significance in relation to linguistic diversity […] is the simple truth that language embodies the intellectual wealth of the people who use it. A language and the intellectual productions of their speakers are often inseparable (Hale 1992, 36).

In the same vein the authors of *Vanishing Voices* justify why we should be concerned with linguistic diversity. Among other reasons, because any language is "a uniquely human invention" and "in our languages lies a rich source of the accumulated wisdom of all humans". And they explicitly evoke the traditional idea of cultural patrimony: "Every language is a living museum, a monument to every culture it has been a vehicle to" (Nettle and Romaine 2000, 14). In another well-known book, David Crystal speaks of the "richness of heritage" to describe language both as "a pool of inherited knowledge from which we can draw" and "repositories of history" (2000, 34–35, 40). Likewise, three well-known advocates of linguistic diversity say that access to the "library of humanity's knowledge" is gained through languages, and

each language is "the expression of the intangible cultural heritage of people" (Skutnabb-Kangas, Maffi & Harmon 2003, 29).

From the previous sample it is not irrelevant to ask the question: In what sense language is a collective heritage? I see two main versions, often mixed for the sake of argument, of the idea of language as a cultural heritage. Or rather, there are two different aspects in arguing the heritage feature of languages. Interpretations may highlight one or another aspect but they are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, heritage can be understood as the totality of texts available in a language, provided that the word "text" is taken in a very large sense to cover all kinds of linguistic products, oral as well as written, jokes and songs as well as literary masterpieces. Sometimes, on the other hand, language itself is seen as a remarkable human creation or an original form of human expression developed over the ages. One way or another, the tongue appears to be a valuable centuries-old legacy, considered either a rich repository of the past or an extraordinary achievement accomplished through countless generations.

Furthermore, a new question arises concerning this value description: Whose heritage? Here we find two answers depending on who owns the heritage, humanity as a whole or the community of native speakers. In the latter case, the idea of cultural heritage is likely to be mixed with the issue of identity. But again there is no clear distinction between the two answers in debates on linguistic diversity; of course, they are in no way inconsistent, although the emphasis may be placed in either.

One remark should be made here. It is possible to view languages as a cultural heritage because the very idea of cultural heritage has evolved in the last decades, changing and broadening its meaning considerably. Three features of this evolution are noteworthy: 1) the shift from understanding cultural heritage as high culture, focused on the classical idea of monument, i.e., historical buildings and outstanding works of art, to a more ethnographic view covering all manifestations of collective life, traditional artifacts and folklore; 2) so, instead of focusing exclusively on material things, this new view attaches an increased importance to a culture's intangible aspects such as oral traditions, performing arts, knowledge and representations, or traditional craftsmanship; 3) the boundaries between cultural heritage and natural, i.e. environmental heritage blur (Ariño Villarroya 2002). The

first two features are well reflected by UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which proposes a definition of "intangible cultural heritage" including an explicit mention to language (UNESCO 2003, article 2).

It is important to clarify the meaning of language as a cultural heritage, without disregarding the rhetorical effect intended by such value description. I guess the idea of cultural heritage has a very special purpose when used in linguistic diversity debates. Claims about language as cultural patrimony seem to be tailored to counteract or neutralize the communicative value of languages by means of an alternative description of their value. It is just a guess because very often the description of language as cultural heritage is argued while simply overlooking its communicative value. Clearly, this omission speaks for itself, but sometimes the contrast is made explicit, as in the following passage:

> Language enables us to do many things that have meaning and value independently of the language in which they are accomplished. It is therefore instrumental in achieving these independent ends […]. But language also has an intrinsically valuable dimension for its speakers beyond the extraneous ends to which it can be put. It is itself a human creation or accomplishment, participation in which is an end in itself. Each language is a manifestation of human creativity that has value independently of its practical uses. (Réaume 2003, 283)

The passage deserves a careful reading. The instrumental character of language, or its practical uses, can only be understood regarding it as a means of communication. As Réaume says, language has an obvious instrumental value by which speakers can do many different things, but its value is not exhausted by these practical uses. Languages have another value dimension quite independent from their instrumental role. Understood as a "human creation or accomplishment", a "manifestation of human creativity", her account of language falls under our description of cultural heritage, at least in the version that regards the originality of expression as language's main feature.

Indeed, Réaume appears to dismiss language's other aspect as stock of texts: "Although it may express ideas, concepts, myths, traditions that have equivalents in other languages, it is a unique form of expression and valuable as such" (ibid.). The suggested reason is

worthy of attention: language is unique only as a form of expression. Without opening the long discussion about the limits of translation, it would suffice to assume – as some authors do – that certain texts are genuinely accessible only in a particular language. They would be, so to speak, embodied in it and as such irreplaceable.

Anyway, the point is the contrast between the two languages' value dimensions, to the extent that languages have value independently of their communicative potential, or beyond it. More precisely, the crucial aspect of the discussion is how the contrast between both dimensions is formulated in terms of intrinsic versus instrumental value. As cultural heritage, i.e., as an original achievement and manifestation of human creativity, language is intrinsically valuable (I leave aside that this intrinsic value is confined to its speakers, according to Réaume); as a means of communication, it has a merely instrumental value.

However, the notion of intrinsic value is a really tricky matter, which is the object of continual disputes among philosophers. Indeed, when we attach an intrinsic value to languages, under their description as cultural heritage we may be playing carelessly with different distinctions about value, often mixed together under the label of "intrinsic value": extrinsic vs. intrinsic, instrumental vs. final, conditional vs. unconditional, or priceless vs. priceable (Martin, 2009). I will comment briefly on this conceptual mess.

In fact, in the above passage Réaume conflates the two first distinctions into a single one, opposing instrumental to intrinsic value, as it is often done. However, this opposition is a false contrast and Christine Korsgaard cogently argues that we need to keep the two distinctions apart (1996). Certainly, the opposite of an instrumental good is something valued for its own sake, that is, something considered as an end in itself, while the opposite of an intrinsic good is something whose value derives from another source, i.e., an extrinsic value. In one case, the distinction has to do with the way in which we value something, either as end or means; in the other case, it refers to the source of value, whether it lies in certain properties of the valued object or in the relationship with something else. Of course, the conflation sounds quite natural because instrumental value is an obvious case of extrinsic value; but it is not the only case. Besides that, the very equivalence of ends and intrinsic goods also raises philosophical doubts. As a matter of fact, the conflation usually amounts to a reduction of the

extrinsic/intrinsic distinction to the end/means distinction, dropping out the former and barring the way to interesting possibilities, such as extrinsic ends (Korsgaard 1996, 250–251).

If we further assume that an intrinsic value is unconditional, in the sense of valuable in all circumstances, we merely add more confusion. For something may be valued for its own sake or as end, but only when certain conditions are met, that is, not under all circumstances. Indeed, such is usually the case. In fact, the problem here is how to deal adequately with what Korsgaard calls "mixed values" (ibid, 263). Luxurious instruments are a clear example. Take a Stradivarius. We may wonder if it is valuable because it is a means or an end. I guess that languages belong precisely to this class of mixed values, just like a luxurious instrument.

However, assuming the simple opposition of intrinsic and instrumental value, as most people do, the key rhetorical move is to suggest that language's intrinsic value is beyond *and above* its instrumental value. Understanding intrinsic value as the value of an end in itself, it cannot be dependent or subordinated to the value of something else, so it becomes a more important kind of value. Then we reach the conclusion that the intrinsic value languages have as cultural heritage is more important than their value as simple communication means. Plainly, this is a *non sequitur*. It is easy to imagine an example of something we value for its own sake, like a small pleasant experience, but whose value is trivial, or extremely dependent on very specific conditions; on the contrary, certain things can be very valuable as means to pursue different goals through a wide range of circumstances, as languages do.

Furthermore, the idea of intrinsic value as an end in itself seems to connote that it is priceless, and this is the main rhetorical effect intended when describing language as cultural heritage in linguistic diversity and death of languages debates. Priceless means here invaluable, a paradoxical expression for something whose value cannot be calculated because it is incomparable. Considered as cultural heritage, the death of a language, even the smallest one, amounts to an irreparable loss. Those who emphasize the communicative value of languages may see the language shift, i.e., the replacement of a lesser-used language by a larger one, as a gain for the speakers; or, at least, as a complex balance in which advantages might match losses, depending on the circumstances. Blocking these trade-offs is

precisely what is at stake here. So, under the description of cultural heritage, each language is irreplaceable and no compensation can be envisaged.

Finally, there is another rhetorical step we should consider, however briefly. When we speak about an intrinsic, higher and priceless value, as an end in itself, the word "dignity" comes easily to mind. So, it should not be a surprise that in recent years the term "dignity" has been applied to languages in official documents of, for example, the European Union as well as in academic books (Moreno Cabrera 2000). In such texts dignity is usually associated with equality, and that seems to be the point of using it. The dignity of languages is meant to warrant an egalitarian view of languages, according to which all languages have equal worth, regardless of their communicative value.

Indeed, in terms of their usefulness as means for communication, languages are not equal at all. As seen before, languages display huge differences regarding their communicative potential, which depends on the number of speakers and the amount of multilingual speakers. By contrast, the concept of dignity evokes the idea of an incomparably high value. Of course, when we say that two things are equal we are comparing them. But such idea of dignity precisely suggests equality in the possession of the highest value, i.e., priceless and incomparable value. If I am right in this point, the use of the term "dignity" applied to languages can be seen as a powerful rhetorical device to defuse what is perceived as a major threat to linguistic egalitarianism: the communicative value of language.

However, far from being ingenuous, the discourse on language's dignity has serious implications, which should be noticed. To conclude, I just want to pick up one with special normative significance. We usually assume that those who speak about the dignity of languages are supposedly defending the rights of minority language speakers. But there is a critical flaw in this argument: from the dignity of languages it does not follow that speakers have rights.

Daniel Weinstock recalls how the Kantian argument goes: if X has dignity, the highest and priceless value, then other agents are duty-bound not to treat X as mere means (Weinstock 2003, 255). So, this supreme value called dignity is the ground for imposing duties on others. If X has dignity and X is a language, then language holds rights against others, including its own speakers, who are not allowed to

treat it as a mere means, whatever that involves in the case of languages (Weinstock 2003, 255).

Therefore, the heirs are not free to dispose of their cultural heritage; rather, they are encumbered by duties towards it. In other words, the argument of language's dignity may serve to justify a coercive policy on the speakers and non-speakers of a given language. It is indeed a sensible reason to pay a closer attention to the descriptions of language's value and their rhetorical uses.

NOTES

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