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Disciplinary Brief

LINGUISTIC JUSTICE

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Nicholas Wolterstorff's stimulating Theology Brief on 'Justice and Rights' majors on justice as rendering persons their right or due in terms of their worth or dignity or excellence. He comments rightly that the Old Testament focuses on social or systemic injustice rather than on individual cases, and that it therefore critiques the laws and social practices of ancient Israel. I want to pick that up from my disciplinary perspective as a sociolinguist, and comment on the ways in which the concepts of 'voice' and language are intertwined with justice and are, in my view, a core component of doing justice.

I take it as axiomatic that the God who made the profusion of creation is also the God of the profusion we find in human language and voice. Genesis 1 bears witness to the unstinting abundance that God created, and John 1 places the Word at the heart of that creation. In language, a surfeit of variety meets us everywhere. We hear a profusion of voices in society. We are immersed in languages, dialects, varieties, genres, accents, jargons, styles. They eddy and swirl round us in an always-changing current of linguistic reproduction and creation.

Language is also a social fact, implicated in the shape of society. It is an identity bearer, a means of self-expression. Our voice in particular is always embodied, personal, situated. Language is wholly interactive (in accord with Wolterstorff's stress on the centrality of interaction), a bridge between self and other, central to communication. As well as a truth teller, language can also be a deceiver. Social inequities produce linguistic inequities, and language reproduces injustice in many areas of society: structures, demographics, power, gender, ethnicity, globalization. Not all the voices of society are easily or equally heard.

The founding sociolinguist Dell Hymes had a concern for justice and how that is evidenced and substantiated in the voices of society – who speaks, who is listened to, who is valued, who is disregarded. 'One way to think of the society in which one would like to live is to think of the kinds of voices it would have', he wrote (1996: 64). In such a sociolinguistics of voice, linguistic justice is something that is not a given but needs to be accomplished. It invites and requires engagement in society, including intellectual engagement. It is a continuation of the Old Testament tradition where the prophetic voice was central to guiding and correcting Israel in the ways of justice.

What is a language?

Linguistic justice begins with a most basic question: What is a language? It turns out this is not a simple or objective matter.

Languages as sociopolitical

There are languages in the world that have different names but are linguistically very similar – Hindi/Urdu, Serbian/Croatian. They are kept apart by political rather than linguistic boundaries. There are other clusters of linguistic codes which are so diverse that some are not mutually intelligible, but they bear a single name such as Arabic or Chinese. They are held together by political rather than linguistic factors. 'A language is a dialect with an army and navy', is an axiom credited to the early 20th century Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich. It is social and political rather than linguistic factors that give a language its status.

From the Enlightenment to colonization

The notion of identifiable languages (and often, their identification with a nation) is in fact an 18th century Enlightenment construct, but one that was imposed on the rest of the world through European colonizers. These – including Christian missionaries - enthusiastically distinguished, defined and named 'languages' wherever they went. In west Africa in the late 19th century, for example, French military expeditions traversed what was to become Senegal, mapping the boundaries of groups and their languages (Irvine & Gal 2000). The languages and their speakers were interpreted as having essential characteristics, including different levels of intelligence. The groups were assumed to be monolingual, but clean boundaries between them could only be mapped by ignoring the prevailing multilingualism. The imperial payoff for such idealizations was that territories and their peoples were identified, segmented and ready for governance.

Wolterstorff has referred to the ways in which elitist and colonialist practices promote injustice. In language, the fruits of inequitable colonial, postcolonial and quasi-colonial ideologies are still manifest in today's world. Sociolinguistic studies have examined the requirement for contestants to speak fluent English not Swahili to win a national beauty contest in Tanzania (Billings 2009); the oppression of the Oroqen language of northeastern China under colonization by the Han Chinese and their language, Mandarin (Li Fengxiang 2005); and the triumph of Bahasa Indonesia as the national language of Indonesia at the expense of many local languages (Errington 1998). In these and many other situations, groups of speakers find their voices stifled by unconscious attitudes or intentional policies.

Language ideologies and injustice

Ideologies of language value one linguistic form or code as better or worse than another, promoting some people's voices and muzzling others'.

Iconization

A language, dialect or feature may be taken as representative of a group of people. Although the association with the group is arbitrary, iconization treats the feature as somehow having a natural and inherent link with the group. This is a very ancient scenario, shown by the story of *shibboleth* in Judges chapter 12. After defeating the tribe of Ephraim in battle, the Gileadites waited for the fleeing Ephraimites at the River Jordan:

> Whenever one of the fugitives of Ephraim said, 'Let me go over', the men of Gilead would say to him, 'Are you an Ephraimite?' When he said, 'No', they said to him, 'Then say Shibboleth', and he said, 'Sibboleth', for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. (NRSV)

The word *shibboleth* has been carried into English to mean precisely a language feature which is identified with a group.

Erasure

If what you speak is not recognized as a language, your voice may be denigrated or ignored, you will likely be subject to linguistic injustice. Hungarian speakers in Romania, for example, believe their speech is inferior to that spoken in Hungary. In countless countries, minority-group children have been punished for speaking their home language at school. These evaluations represent the belief that one linguistic form or code is better or worse than another. It sounds more beautiful or more ugly, is superior or inferior, is more or less moral. This forms the basis for linguistic injustice. We place people socially by the way they talk. As George Bernard Shaw wrote in the preface to his play *Pygmalion*, words later paraphrased into one of the songs of *My Fair Lady:*

> An Englishman's way of speaking absolutely classifies him, The moment he talks he makes some other Englishman despise him.

In the United States, mental mapping studies of dialect regions show that the dialects which are the most salient to Americans are precisely the ones that they despise – those of New York City and the South. Denigration of other people's accents is widespread, and its saddest outcome is how often it is reflected in speakers also downgrading their own accent.

Jesus and Linguistic Discrimination

Jesus was also probably subject to linguistic denigration. We know that Galilee was regarded as a cultural backwater by the Jerusalem elite – reflected in Nathaniel's rhetorical question, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' (John 1: 46). From the Gospels, we also know how distinctive was the Galilean accent (presumably of Aramaic), because it gave Peter away as he hovered on the edges of Jesus' trial (Matthew 26: 73). We can assume that Jesus had a similar accent to Peter's, so the Jerusalem rulers' hostility was probably not just to what Jesus said but to how he said it. His voice was 'despised and rejected'.

Language as a site of struggle

The Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin, an unorthodox Orthodox Christian of the early 20th century, maintained that language is a site of struggle between the dynamic centrifugal forces which whirl it apart into diversity, and the hegemonic centripetal forces which strive to standardize and prescribe the way language should be. He celebrates the centrifugal - the divergence, individuality, creativity, even the chaos of language variety.

Standard languages

Language standardization through the education system is a primary site of linguistic injustice. Even the world's best-known standard accent - British Received Pronunciation ('the Queen's English/BBC English') - is a relatively recent invention: before the mid-18th century there was no sense of a standard pronunciation for English. Still nowadays only a small minority of the British population can speak this standard. French is arguably the world's most standardized language, since the founding of the Académie Française in the 17th century. As the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has theorized, using the standard gives its speaker linguistic capital . Even French encompasses a large range of variety that is ignored in defining what the standard is, to the point of excluding the idea that variety even exists.

If speaking the standard is a social advantage, then lacking it will be a disadvantage. The unavoidable outcome of language standardization is inequity, certainly for some, often for the many. The routine companion of linguistic disadvantage is economic and social disadvantage, whether that be for Moroccans in France, northerners in England, Quechua speakers in Peru, or African Americans. If the 'best people' speak in a certain way, you will not become one of the best people without their speech. In his preface to the manual *Rhyming Roadways to Good Speech* (1940), Professor F. Sinclaire of Canterbury University College, New Zealand, wrote:

> Debased speech – it cannot too strongly be insisted – is a symptom of general cultural debasement, of growing insensibility to values which lie at the very roots of all culture. Someone has said that people who talk through the nose will think through the nose. It is certain that if we speak badly we shall think badly and feel coarsely.
>
> Quoted in Gordon & Abell (1990: 30)

Vernacular versus standard

However, local and subcultural groups create and maintain countervailing linguistic norms which are defiantly oppositional to the standard. The vernacular – rather, 'vernaculars', always pluralized - is immensely more variegated than the standard, and is the usual locus of linguistic innovation and creativity. Shared local networks and practices serve as vernacular maintenance mechanisms with their own powers of persuasion and conformity in the face of institutional propagation of the standard. Most people accept the standard as natural, normal, commonsense, eliding the often conflictual socioeconomic and sociolinguistic realities. But on the basis of speech, people – including academics - have been prepared to make large social and personal judgments.

Babel and Pentecost

The stabilizing, centralizing impetus of linguistic standard and convention is in tension with the decentralizing, momentary, creative use of language. The centrifugal forces are always spinning new words, new dialects, new languages, new voices, regardless of all efforts to the contrary by academies, educators, politicians or pedants. However, the belief that monolingualism is natural and that multilingualism is a curse is deeply embedded in western consciousness, and it is the Bible that has provided the leading image and narrative of this in the cultural memory of the West.

Babel

The story in Genesis 11 is usually interpreted as a condemnation of language diversity, and is still enormously influential and productive. But there is an alternative reading available for the narrative: that the judgment of Babel promoted the spread of humankind and the rich diversification of its languages. The fault of Babel was not pride but a refusal to disperse and 'fill the earth' as mandated at creation and after the flood. In Bell (2011) I argue that Babel is a blessing rather than a curse, adopting the interpretation proposed by Walter Brueggemann (1982). Babel is in this reading a charter for linguistic variety, a manifesto for multilingualism rather than a lament for lost monolingualism.

There is a close link between this view of Babel and Bakhtin's centrifugal forces in language change. Babel is in part a story about linguistic power, about the social and political meanings of monolingualism and multilingualism. As indicated earlier, the European nation-state was created with the assumption that a nation should have its own single language. Such monolingualism is routinely coercive against other languages. Babel stands as a monument to the ultimate futility of the drive to enforce monolingualism.

Pentecost

The day of Pentecost has often been described as the reversal of Babel, but close comparison shows this is not the case. Pentecost involves not so much the reversal of Babel as its redemption. Reversing Babel would mean that speakers returned to speaking a single language or hearers returned to hearing a single language. But that is not what happened. At Pentecost speakers talked and listeners heard in a great variety of languages (not in fact in ecstatic tongues) - Acts 2 indicates no fewer than thirteen. The languages remained different but they were understood. Peter then stood up and preached to the crowd, however, presumably in a single language, and communicated well enough for them to be 'cut to the heart'. The multiplicity of languages at Pentecost were not given primarily as a matter of communication, then, but of *identity*. Acts 2 characterizes the languages three times as the listeners' mother tongues - the languages they grew up in, the languages they were born in, the languages they were at home in. The coming of the Spirit was marked by an affirmation of their identities and of the diverse languages and cultures in which these 'devout Jews from every nation under heaven' were at home.

There is, however, one sense in which the effect of Babel was reversed at Pentecost if not the phenomenon itself. Peter's sermon was preached in a lingua franca, an imperial language – probably Greek, possibly Aramaic. The spread and inheritance of languages of empire meant that diverse and scattered audiences were all able to understand a single

tongue. This gave Jesus his probable mother tongue (Aramaic), and the universality of Greek enabled the wide preaching of the early church and the spread and preservation of the New Testament writings. What happened at Pentecost was in some way the best of both worlds linguistically, affirming both identity through community languages and communication through a shared lingua franca.

The profusion of voices

I would suggest that, with Hymes and Bakhtin, we seek not only amelioration of people's linguistic conditions but address the foundations of linguistic discrimination and inequity. Linguistic justice promotes the speaking and hearing of marginalized and stifled voices. Such commitments were often the prime drivers that motivated the founders of the field of sociolinguistics, and they have continued to spur my own and successive generations of sociolinguistic scholars – many of them Christians.

It is the role of such a sociolinguistics to 'give voice'. This includes giving voice to ourselves, but saliently it also stresses the need to enable the voices of others. To accept someone's voice is to accept them; to reject someone's voice, rejects them. If we can give voice, we can also take voice away. We can disable the voices of others through not listening to them or by drowning them out. Or we can 'give ear' to what the socially marginalized are saying. I know that my country has a particular responsibility to Māori and Pasifika voices, and other nations have their own parallel situations. For this we need a politics of voice, which celebrates the profusion of voices, and which is committed to a just hearing for all those. Such staunch and adept listenership is one hallmark of a just and Christian approach to language in society: 'Those who have ears to hear, let them hear'.

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