

Language, Aim, and Fire



The Building of the Tower of Babel, Hendrik Van Cleve III, 1590-5

When I cannot see words curling like rings of smoke round me I am in darkness—I am nothing.—Virginia Woolf

The limits of my language means the limits of my world. —Ludwig Wittgenstein

From time immemorial, if not earlier, and at the insistence of a stubborn gene sequence that is apparently immune to amendment, man has been devising, scheming, concocting out of the givens of his life (location, climate, culture) the means to erect barriers (physical, psychological) for no other reason than to exclude others.

The mistrusted other typically belongs to other races, religions, or social classes, subscribes to an alternative political vision, and more recently is of a different sexual orientation. Unable to escape his otherness, often a lifelong sentence, he will come to know well the slings and arrows of hostility and rejection; and if he happens to be exceptionally gifted or talented, the envy he awakens will be used against him. Anthropologist Arthur Keith famously referred to the 'you're with me or against me' reflex as the amity-enmity complex, which privileges members inside a particular tribe, group, or community, and stigmatizes all those on the outside. Ethologists (Konrad Lorenz, Niko Tinbergen) have observed same behaviour pattern in the animal world, in particular among the higher apes.

This primordial pre-disposition to exclude those who don't belong remains one of the decisive activating agents and predictors of human behaviour. Without exception, traditions and institutions that span generations are rigorously formalized by rules and rites that are jealously protected within the tribe or group matrix, while serving strict notice—you are not one of us—to everyone else. It seems that no matter what the endeavour, from the trivial to the consequential, ever resourceful man is always at the ready to exclude those outside his group, forcing the conclusion that he is prey to deep seated impulses over which he has very little or no control. Xenophobia, from the Greek meaning 'fear of the stranger,' is a condition whose universality remains unchallenged despite man's extensive legislative efforts to domesticate the proclivity.

We are all familiar with the long and unflattering history of the most oft used means or basis of exclusion—skin colour, education, religious affiliation, wealth—where every category begets a formal hierarchy that matricizes one's kind while leaving on the outside all those towards whom one less kind. India's caste system, formerly abolished in 1949, was (and to

a certain extent remains) a crowning achievement in respect to enforcing the rigid (ruthless) stratification of trades and occupations.

One of the most overlooked and least suspected of exclusionary tools is language, especially when we consider that there was once only one language in the world—when man first began to speak. It must surely confound the mind that out of that one language there are now 6,500 (excluding regional argots and dialects), which is all the more remarkable since the existence of the thousands of tongues everyone doesn't speak betrays the original purpose of language: to communicate. Language, viewed as an organizing principle, is an entropy-resistant, centripetal force that provides the cohesiveness that allows societies to form and endure, and vouchsafes for the viability of every social contract.

When man first took his first steps (approximately 100,000 years ago), an advent that coincided with self-consciousness and rudimentary speech, he occupied one location (Africa). From that narrow compass, in response to necessity and curiosity, he began to explore the world, taking his one language with him. Over time, that one language morphed into a second and then a third. To better understand what caused this dimorphism, or language mitosis, one must dig deep into the inner workings of human nature.

In endeavouring to account for the incredible diversity of languages, we are asking what causes a people, in all likelihood a splinter group, to vary its language to such an extent that the original speakers no longer understand it and are therefore excluded from the emerging new group.

We know from psychology that one of the constants in human behaviour is for an abused individual or group to become the abuser if circumstance permits. In a tribal or group context, abuse can arise consequent to repeated discriminatory distribution of limited resources, or a territorial dispute

which unjustly advantages one party over another. Ethiopia's Messay Kebede, in *What's Wrong with Africa*, speculates that Africa has been shamefully served by its post-colonial leaders (Idi Amin, Robert Mugabe, Charles Taylor, Sani Abacha et al) because during their formative years, they were subjected to colonial abuse, and to such a degree that, post independence, when they wrested the levers of power unto themselves, they, in turn, became abusers, subjecting their citizenry to horrors once thought to be the sole prerogative of the colonizer. As it concerns the recurring behavioural pathology of world leaders who have ruthlessly and remorselessly betrayed their people's hopes for a better future, it constitutes one of the least recognized patterns of history that abuse and exclusion beget abuse and exclusion, that "the blood dimmed tide" is an every widening circle from which there is no escaping but for those with means and influence.

A careful reading of historical change suggests that the agency behind the birth of any new language is retribution against an abuse of power or privilege that has rendered unhappy or scarlet lettered a faction within a group, such that the excluded or disenfranchized individuals must coalesce into a break away group, where they begin to secrete a new language in order to erase the memory of and permanently separate itself from the abuser. Predictably, the break away group, in forging its new identity, not only spurns the language of the group it has disaffected from, but significantly alters its religious practices, dress protocols, culinary accents and aesthetic preferences.

One only has to look at the splitting of Portuguese and Spanish, an event that cannot be separated from the history of the region where there was once only Galician-Spanish spoken, until the 12th century, when Portugal split from the Kingdom of Leon, at which point two distinct languages began to develop as a consequence of mutual hostility, each bent on securing its territory and carving out a distinct identity.

Over time, the separate languages, word-brick by word-brick, took on the likeness of battlements erected to ensure the safety of those behind them and to exclude everyone else on the outside. And while the written languages are similar, that is accessible to speakers of both languages, Portuguese pronunciation is such that Spanish speakers don't understand it while the Portuguese, however imperfectly, understand Spanish, which gives them a decided linguistic advantage over their once hostile neighbour. The words for the number two, *dos* in Spanish and *dois* in Portuguese resemble each other orthographically; but their pronunciation is radically different: dohs and doysh. The same with bread (*pan* and *pão*), pronounced pahn and peh-o.

What is essential in any new language is that it instills in its speakers a sense of community and identity, hard earned values the group will defend to the death. Speakers of a common language enjoy the privileges and empowerment that come from belonging to a group. And where you have two contiguous groups contesting a limited natural resource, the "you're in you're out" binary promises not a reason-based but gut response to the conflict.

Language, conspicuously colourless, scentless and weightless, and yet capable of causing great physical and psychological pain, is the metaphysical equivalent of region, state, province, and country. It is employed both as a fence and rampart to mark out and defend a territory like an animal marks its own with its scent (its urine). Even breakaway groups that have not been abused or disadvantaged will evolve their own language consistent with acquiring and defending a new territory. Language hovers over a people and its real estate like an aura that when seen from afar denotes a secret sharing of a way of life that is a firewall against foreign meddling and influence. To non-speakers, every language is a secret language. To be able to speak behind someone's back in front of his back speaks to the natural advantage of the home

tongue that obliges every visitor to acknowledge his otherness, his status as visitor or outsider. I remember in grade school a friend and I would speak backwards just for the pure pleasure of one-upmanship, of confounding our friends: "I aveh ot yub klim." I have to buy milk pronounced backwards. "Mot si a kcid daeh."

New languages are often born in the bile and spleen of revenge, as the abused turns into the abuser. In the Caribbean (Trinidad, Jamaica, Grenada), the indigenous inhabitants have evolved a local pigeon or argot (dread-talk or Rastafarian) which throws up a barrier between themselves and their former colonizer. As the indigenous populations were being exploited for their labour, they discovered that a new language would allow them to speak behind the back of the oppressor. It was a form of revenge against being economically excluded from the wealth they, themselves, generated with their sweat and toil. Linguists have proposed that if slavery in the United States had endured for two or three more centuries, the language of the slave would have evolved into a separate tongue unintelligible to the slaveowner. Most distinct regions in the world, and sometimes even in towns separated by no more than a few kilometers, use words that are unique to their geography for no other reason than to exclude those that don't belong while asserting their unique identity.

Since the birth of a language and birth of a nation are one and the same, the new language, especially during its formative years, can be likened to a double-edged sword that underscores man's xenophobic temperament as well as a willingness to defend, at all costs, territory and identity. In the spirit of the conquistador and in the absence of deterrents, a stronger language will crush and devour a weaker language.

Every language operates like a gatekeeper; you're only allowed in once you've paid your dues (the time required to master the language). The same holds for computer languages and the many

languages of music (classical, jazz, pentatonic, diatonic, atonal), all of which, however unconsciously, are exclusionary until you make them your own. That language both facilitates and intentionally impedes communication is an imponderable, a dichotomy that speaks to the obscure workings of human nature. What all the world's languages have in common is that it is either the language you speak or it is a secret language.

To an uncertain extent, a person's mother tongue predetermines his relationship with the world. If you're an English speaker huge chunks of the world are already familiar (US, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Hong Kong), just as an Inuit speaker's world is limited to the range of his mother tongue and its contact with surrounding tongues.

That man is by nature obsessed with power (control) and is more positively disposed towards his own than others is the unflattering truth behind the birth of every language, which accounts for the incredible diversity of languages as proxies for both man's lust for power and predisposition to exclude all those outside his group.

And finally, as it concerns the highly specialized glossary of profanity aimed at the other, much of it inspired by the proctologists's area of concentration, every language includes in its operations the ways and means to weaponize language.

If there were an 11th Commandment, it might read: Thou shalt not language, aim and fire.