International Ecolinguistics Association

Commentary

Language, connections and the climate crisis

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Nirehizkuntzalekugune bat da
(My language is my home)
Xabi Odreozola Ezeitza (2016) (reproduced with permission)

Nirehizkuntzalekugune bat da:
nineuguztizizannaitekeenlekua;
nibizi, izan, maite, negaregin, amestu, barreegin,
injustizienaurkaamorruetaoihuegindezakedanlekua;
ninaizenmoduannireburuamaitedudanlekua;
nimaitenautenekmaite eta
errespetatzenditudanlekua;
nineuorainaldian eta present izatekolekua;
niaitortuaizatekolekua;
nineuikusaraziaizatekolekua;
nitaldekobeste bat eta
bestedenakbezainezinbestekoizatekolekua;
nisalburikegoteko eta adimentsuizatearieustekolekua;
nirehitzekbizitzahartzendutenlekua;
nirearbasoekbizirikarituduren eta biziaz,
ludiazetaunibertsoazideiarikonenakasmatudituztenlekua;
nirearbasoei, horregatikguztiagatik, ohoreegitekolekua;
nirearbasoeinihonainobizirikekartzeagatikeskerrakematekolekua;
nirejendea eta neu ere errealbihurtzengarenlekua;
nirehizkuntzaeneEtxeadut, hots,
bizitzakzentzuguztiahartzenduenwlekua.

My language is a space
where I can be myself completely,
where I can live, love, cry, dream, laugh, and rage against injustice,
where I can love myself the way I am,
where I can love and respect those who love me,
where I am in the present,
where I can make myself visible,
where I can be recognized,
where I am one of the group and as essential as the others,
where I am safe and remain intelligent,
where my words come to life,
where my ancestors lived and created ideas about life, the world, and the universe,
where I honour my ancestors for the above,
where I thank my ancestors for having brought me thus far,
where my people and I become real.
My language is my home — a space where life acquires all its meaning.

In 2022 I found myself needing to organise interpreting from Portuguese to English for Dr Nelly Marubo, an indigenous woman leader from the Javari Valley in Brazil, at an online

talk and a conference, part of a celebration of the lives of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereria, murdered in Brazilian Amazonia in June that year. I'd met Nelly through a mutual friend, anthropologist Cecilia McCallum from the Federal University of Bahia and the University of St Andrews. I began preparations for the interpreting several weeks before the conference, and arranged a Zoom call with Nelly to introduce myself and to find out about how she planned to organise her talks. She had already sent me a title, "A relaçãopolítica social entre os nawavo e o exterior". After some discussion with Cecilia, we established a loose translation of the title: "Social relations between humans and non-humans: Indigenous ways of understanding the world", but I could already tell that this might not be straightforward!

When Nelly came into the pre-conference Zoom planning meeting and showed me, and the Brazilian schoolteacher I'd asked to interpret for me, the PowerPoint presentation she'd set up for her talk, she included beings such as the Jaguar and the Yellow Macaw as being her relatives, not to mention the forest itself — part of a long list of the *nawavo* making up part of the Marubo connected world. The schoolteacher began to argue with Nelly in Portuguese, saying that what she was saying didn't make sense, as "a Jaguar can't be your relative". My limited Portuguese was good enough to understand what was going on and realise that we needed to change the interpreter! We eventually found someone to interpret the talk whom Nelly was very comfortable with, but on Nelly's request, I also engaged a Brazilian anthropologist who spoke good English and who was familiar with Marubo cosmology, as an "interpreting consultant" to be online during Nelly's talks and listen out for any inconsistencies and problems.

So, from very early on in the conference interpreting planning process, I began to discover that some concepts in indigenous cosmology cannot be put over in colonial languages in ways that make sense for listeners who have been raised in Judeo-Christian cosmology, and that we have to work much harder to understand these ideas.

This experience led me to read further in the area of language and identity — in fact, I registered for an online Masters module at King's College London, "Language and Global Identity", during which I was very happy to discover the disciplines of ecolinguistics (Arran Stibbe et al.) and ecotranslation (Michael Cronin et al.). Stibbe's and Cronin's writings included concepts and thinking which directly addressed the difficulty I'd had, trying to arrange interpreting for a talk aiming to put over indigenous ideas about the world into colonial languages for an audience largely from the Global North.

Below, I set out my thoughts on one of the topics raised during the Masters module: the statement, "In a globalised world, the fewer languages the better". I use the context of the climate emergency to consider this statement. I discuss why it may have been written, but I also explore concepts from ecotranslation, ecolinguistics, and writings on indigenous ways of thinking and of seeing the world, on the concept of "untranslatables", on language loss and on the connections between language loss and biodiversity loss. Through these lenses, I argue that, for a truly globalised world and to combat the climate emergency, every language in the world needs to be considered, and to be listened to, with equal importance.

Cultural sociologist John Tomlinson, in his book *Globalization and Culture*, defines globalisation as "complex connectivity", referring to the "rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterize modern social life" (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 2). He cites McGrew, in an alternative definition, as speaking of globalisation as "simply the intensification of global interconnectedness" and observing that it implies a "multiplicity of linkages: 'nowadays, goods, capital, people, knowledge, images, crime, pollutants, drugs, fashions and beliefs all readily flow across territorial boundaries'" (McGrew, 1992, pp. 65, 67).

In his book *Words of the World: The Global Language System*, sociologist Abram de Swaan talks about the concept of a "global language system", identifying a hierarchy of global languages. As linguist and philosopher Michael A. Morris in his review of this book states, Swaan says that "at the top of the global language hierarchy is a 'hypercentral' language, English, which allegedly holds the entire world language system together". He discusses the role of other, "supercentral" and "peripheral" languages, but states that despite the existence of these other languages, "the language at the top, English, tends to expand at the expense of lesser languages". Swaan suggests that "although language diversity can be a casualty of such rivalry, the spread of central languages increases communication possibilities" (Morris, 2004, p. 621).

Chinese, of course, is another "supercentral" language. Translation theorist Emily Apter, in her article "Untranslatables: A World System", writes about "two world-systems, locked into an agon for linguistic hegemony, pitting, say, Global Chinese against Global English" with "Asia and Euro-America increasingly [positioning] themselves as bipolar examples of oneworldedness" and both "Global Chinese and Global English already [serving] as linguae francae of the Internet" (Apter, 2008, p. 593).

Tomlinson reminds us that nineteenth-century radical thinker Karl Marx predicted a world with a universal language by presenting a "particularly bold picture of a global culture in his depiction of a future communist society … A world in which the divisions of nature have disappeared, along with … 'local' attachments, including religious beliefs; *a world with a universal language*, a world literature and cosmopolitan cultural tastes." (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 75).

It could be imagined at first glance that a single "hypercentral" language or a small number of languages would be useful in order to facilitate these interconnected networks, to smooth the passage of global linkages of goods, capital, people, and the rest — and even a "world literature". But that way of thinking is predicated on what, within the globalised world, is situated and defined as important. If we are only thinking about the language of trade, of commerce, or of international air travel, then perhaps English — with Mandarin Chinese and Spanish close behind — are useful "linguae francae" to keep the global wheels turning. However, international trade and international travel are not the only issues that are of concern to a globalised world. Indigenous leader, environmentalist, philosopher, poet and writer Ailton Krenak puts forward another view of the globalised world, in contrast to the utopian Marxist ideal of a "global language":

> The world's major centres, its metropolises, are carbon copies of one another. If you visit Tokyo, Berlin, New York, Lisbon or Sao Paolo, you'll see the same delight in erecting incredible high-rises with ultra-smart panoramic elevators, fast as spacecraft … In the meantime, humanity is being extricated from this organism we call Earth. The idea that we, humanity, should peel ourselves off the earth to live in a civilizing abstraction is absurd. The notion suppresses all diversity, denies the plurality of forms of life, of existence, and habits. It serves up a one-size-fits-all menu, dress code, and, if possible, language. (Krenak, 2020, pp. 26-27)

Krenak's vision, in contrast to Marx's (or even McGrew's) takes into account those who will be excluded from this global utopia, and how the world will be affected by the results of its own actions.

In the current age of the Anthropocene, the most urgent issue facing the globalised world is the climate emergency. Climate activist Sophia Kianni reminds us that most of the conversation about the climate emergency, including most of the scientific literature, is written in English, excluding the 75 per cent of the world who don't speak it. She has set up an international youth organisation called "Climate Cardinals" to translate climate resources into more than 100 world languages.

But, when it comes to the issue of the climate emergency, if the international conversation is held in English and merely translated into other, minority languages, what is actually happening here? Are those speakers of other languages — including those people in the so-called "sacrifice zones", i.e. those who are the most affected by the climate crisis — being relegated to a position of mere "shadow participants"? Are they just listening on the margins rather than sitting at the tables where they need to be, playing a full part in the discussions? We should look at what is actually happening here.

As Sonia Guajajara reminded us in a speech at the United Nations in April 2023 (United Nations, 2023b), indigenous people make up 5 per cent of the population of the world, but are responsible for the protection of 80 per cent of the Earth's biodiversity.

It may be that English — or the other languages of the colonisers — does not have the answers to the crisis currently facing us. Some of the concepts that the "globalised world" may need to hear right now may not exist in English, or any of the languages of the colonisers — Spanish, Portuguese, French, German — who have also played their part in taking over and eliminating many indigenous languages.

Professor of ecological linguistics Arran Stibbe cites Nettle and Romaine (2000), who, he tells us, "in discussing the hegemonic spread of monolingualism, write that 'our global village must be truly multicultural and multilingual, or it will not exist at all'" (Stibbe, 2012, p. 414).

We've been lucky in that some of these indigenous people, despite the colonisers' best efforts of oppressing minority languages through laws, enforced monolingual education, punishment, forced marriage and adoption, and even genocide, have been able to keep their own language. These ancient languages, rooted in place, provide the link to the stories

and the knowledge of the past — but also hold the key to our future. Irish language speaker and professor of French and translation studies Michael Cronin, speaking on "translation, ecology and the politics of the Anthropocene", cited Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's idea that "in the cultures and languages of indigenous people in various parts of the planet you find a philosophy, a culture, a way of engaging with other species and with the non-human worlds", and continued: "What we find in these cultures is not something that should be memorialised or retrieved before it disappears as an antiquarian gesture, but, in fact, what Viveiros de Castro calls a 'future-oriented cosmology'" — that is, "a way of knowledge that will allow us to create … a sustainable future" (Cronin, 2017b).

Brazilian writer Eliane Brum writes: "When the Indigenous say the river is their grandfather, they really mean it's their grandfather. They are not speaking naively, unwittingly … To the contrary. This way of comprehending life and each one's place within it is much more complex. It is another form of relating to all other beings and engaging in exchange with them — and not monetary or monetizable exchange, it should be emphasized" (Brum, 2023, p. 93). In the same vein, anthropologist Peter Gow says "we have to radically rethink the whole problem of belief, or at least stop lazily saying that 'X believe that the dead play drums or that Y believe that river spirits play flutes.' They don't believe it — it is true! It is knowledge about the world. The question then becomes how exactly people build up their knowledge of the world, and what features of it they specifically attend to and find interesting" (Gow, personal communication, 1998, as cited in Goldman, 2013, p. xiv). Michael Cronin, in his book *Ecotranslation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene*, tells us that "in the Amerinidian worldview, the notion of humans as separate from nature is meaningless" (Cronin, 2017a, p. 79).

This brings us back to Nelly Marubo, and the concept of "untranslatable ideas". Philologist and philosopher Barbara Cassin, in her *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, sets out "problem" words within the context of European philosophy and discusses the range of equivalencies and non-equivalencies and "false friends" that exist for each of these terms across European nations, cultures and languages. In this case, looking at European languages only, she uses the term "untranslatable" not as meaning that "the terms in question, or the expressions … are not and cannot be translated", stating in contrast that the term "indicates that their translation, into one language or another, creates a problem to the extent of sometimes generating a neologism or imposing a new meaning on an old world" and that it is a "sign of the way in which, from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed" (Cassin et al., 2014, p. xvii).

Strong geographic images, reminding us of the historic physical distance between languages and language speakers, are used by translation theorist Emily Apter to describe untranslatable ideas. Discussing "analytic philosophy's inveterate hostility to its continental counterpart", she uses the term "a *gulf* of untranslatability"; later in the same article, talking about the struggle between Asia and Euro-America for "linguistic hegemony", she

describes them as being "two empires … exacerbated by *high walls* of linguistic untranslatability" (Apter, 2008, p. 588, my emphasis). Can these "gulfs" and "high walls" indeed be bridged, or surmounted, through translation? Michael Cronin also uses metaphors of hard-to-navigate geographic terrain when talking about translation, saying that "… translation is about relatedness as it brings together people and languages and cultures, crossing the *chasms* of cultural suspicion and historical aversion". He suggests that "the untranslatable becomes a way of thinking about the specificity of languages and cultures, a call to attend to the singularity of written expression in particular places at particular times" and elaborates, saying, "One of the paradoxes of untranslatability, of course, is that you need more translation not less. You have to *try harder to understand what the other is saying, devote more resources to the effort and value successful translation all the more when it is achieved, precisely because it is so difficult*." (Cronin, 2017a, p. 17, my emphasis).

In the italicised sentence above, Cronin reminds us that rather than ignoring ideas and concepts in different languages that seem complicated or unusual, paying close attention to these ideas and devoting time and energy to working out how to transmit them in different languages is well worth the effort put in. At Nelly Marubo's talks, it became very clear that, following Cronin, devoting time and energy to working out how to transmit the Marubo worldview to an English-speaking audience in Lancaster (and online) was indeed well worth the effort (see Marubo, 2022a, 2022b).

Michael Cronin took part in an online conversation with Professor Peadar Kirby, which took place in English and Irish in June 2020, to commemorate the publication of his bilingual book *Irish and Ecology*. The publicity for the conversation billed the book as arguing that endangered languages like Irish "offer a way of engaging with the non-human world which can teach us invaluable skills for a future where the non-human is coming back to exact climate revenge on human hubris". In this talk, Cronin — who is also interested in looking at issues of translation supporting communications between species as well as between humans — illustrates very clearly, using the example of Dublin place names, the issue of indigenous languages being inextricably linked to the land.

One consequence of the language shift from Irish to English in the nineteenth century, he suggested, "was that people found themselves in a landscape, in surroundings they no longer had a language for. They became blind, if you like, to the significance, the meaning, the historical situation, the geological origins of the places in which they found themselves". And, he asserted, "what happens then is … the main relationship that one begins to develop with the land [becomes] … one of possession rather than one of meaning or one of significance".

He pointed out that the English name for the city of Dublin comes from the Irish *Dubh Linn*, meaning the "black pool". But the Irish name for the city, *Baile Atha Cliath*, means "the town of the ford of the hurdles" (Ireland's four principal routeways converged at a crossing place made of hurdles of interwoven saplings straddling the low-tide Liffey (In Your Pocket, n.d.)). He gave the example that the English name Phoenix Park comes from the Irish word *fhionnuisce*, meaning clear or still water. His third example was the street that

his office looked out onto — Nassau Street — a name, as he said, which was a marker of the British Empire. But the old name for the street was *Sráid Thobar Phádraig*, or "Patrick's Well". He makes the point that "the city of Dublin's future depends on how it treats its water supply. The very survival of the citizens of Dublin depends on the most precious resource of all, which is the water that's coming into the city." "The marks of water", he says, "are everywhere in the Irish language in the city of Dublin, but in English you are blind to this".

Another example in which language contains information related to the land is given by linguist K. David Harrison in his book *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge*. He gives a simple example: the word for "cloud" in the minority Western !Xoon language of Namibia. "In !Xoon, clouds are called 'rain houses'. By learning the word for cloud, a !Xoon-speaking child automatically gets (for free) the extra information that clouds contain and are the source of rain. An English child learning the word 'cloud', or a French child learning 'nuage', gets no information about rain and has to learn on her own, by observation or by instruction, that rain comes from clouds." (Harrison, 2007, p. 16).

Later in his book, Harrison cites studies by Lizarralde (2001) of the language of the Bari people of Venezuela, who had been first contacted 30 years earlier, which "posed the question of how much knowledge of the plant world was being lost and how much retained". The Bari people, says Harrison, "live in intimate relations with the rainforest and have learned to use many of its plants for food, material goods, medicine, and construction of houses". One scientist, he wrote, estimated that "the real loss of ethnobotanical knowledge from one generation to the next may be on the order of 40 to 60 per cent".

In another study, Rodrigo Cámara-Leret and Jordi Bascompte from the University of Zurich looked at the links between indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants and individual languages. Stating that "Indigenous languages contain the knowledge that communities have about their surrounding plants and the services they provide", they went on to say that "the use of plants in medicine is a particularly relevant example of such ecosystem services". They found that "most medicinal knowledge is linguistically unique — i.e., known by a single language — and more strongly associated with threatened languages than with threatened plants" and concluded with the powerful statement that: "Each indigenous language is therefore a unique reservoir of medicinal knowledge — a Rosetta stone for unravelling and conserving nature's contributions to people." (Cámara-Leret & Bascompte, 2021).

In February 2023, Pope Francis met a group of indigenous delegates attending the sixth global meeting of the Indigenous Peoples' Forum in Rome. He declared that indigenous people play a critical role in protecting the environment. He said "*We should listen more to indigenous peoples* and learn from their way of life to properly understand that we cannot continue to greedily devour natural resources, because the Earth was entrusted to us in order that it be mother for us, capable of giving to each one what is necessary to live. Therefore, the contribution of indigenous people is essential in the fight against

climate change." He recognised the importance of indigenous languages in his speech, calling upon governments "to recognize indigenous peoples 'with their cultures, languages, traditions and spiritualities'" (Zengarini, 2023, my emphasis). This follows on from Pope Francis' meeting with indigenous leaders in Canada in July 2022 when he apologised for the Catholic Church's role in many years of abuse by missionaries at residential schools in the country, framed in the press as "a key step in the Catholic Church's efforts to reconcile with Native communities and help them heal from generations of trauma" (PBS News Hour, 2022).

On the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples in July 2022, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, declared that "Indigenous women are knowledge keepers of traditional food systems and medicines" and that they are "champions of Indigenous languages and cultures". He went on to say that "Indigenous traditional knowledge can offer solutions to many of our common challenges", and talked about how he had seen first-hand how indigenous people are protecting their lands together with their rich biodiversity. He concluded by calling on Member States to "implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and to promote Indigenous traditional knowledge for the benefit of all" (United Nations, 2022).

The United Nations has declared 2022 to 2032 to be the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs published a Policy Brief about this declaration, entitled "Why Indigenous languages matter". In this important document, published on 10 February, the same week that the Pope made his statements about the importance of the contribution of indigenous people to the fight against climate change, many key points are made about the centrality of indigenous languages to indigenous people's identity. Indigenous languages, it states, are central to "preserving their cultures and worldviews, critical to expressing their self-determination and existence". These languages, it reminds us, "hold vital information about scientific and traditional knowledge on ecosystems, conservation and sustainability that benefits the whole of society". It continues: "Every time an Indigenous language becomes extinct, the millennial knowledge of a culture is lost forever to the detriment of Indigenous Peoples and humanity." (United Nations, 2023a).

Emily Apter cites feminist literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as observing that "pinyin [romanised Chinese spelling] and Basic English (or 'Globlish' as it is sometimes called) extend their hegemony to the detriment of poetic expression" (Spivak, 2005, as cited in Apter, 2008, p. 594). In the lines, originally written in Basque, which introduced this piece of writing, language activist Xabi Odreozola Ezeitza does not describe his language as being "a useful communications tool" that will assist "global interconnectedness" and a "multiplicity of linkages" as in McGrew's definition of globalisation. In marked contrast, he uses phrases in his mother tongue, calling to mind true poetic expression, emotions, safety, and supreme ability to live and experience feelings: "my language is my home", "my language is a space … where I can live, love, cry, dream, laugh and rage against injustice". He conjures up the image of his ancestors living

within this language, using it to create "ideas about life, the world and the universe". Reading his words, even for those of us who have to read them in English (a language in which they have arrived via a journey through Spanish), we have a supreme sense of his belonging, his sense of self, and his ability to express himself, in his own language.

Later in the article where these lines appeared, he writes: "When I use my language instead of English, people often tell me that I look like another person." He notes how he has experienced that when he has supported someone to speak to an audience or to a group in their own indigenous language — which he unpacks for an unaware audience, reminding us that person is "functioning in her language of origin instead of in the language that assimilation has forced her to use" —, he has found that the audience sees that person in "a new and totally different way". Functioning in your own language, he asserts, gives you a special power, putting you in the centre, broadening others' awareness towards you, and revealing a piece of information about you that had been missing when you were speaking in the colonial language. It is this feeling of power and centrality, as well as the sense of connection to ancestors and to place, which is taken away when people are forced to speak a colonial, global language instead of the language they grew up with. This connection ceases to exist when people feel that in order for their children to "get on" they need to stop speaking to them in the language of their ancestors, but, rather, to ensure that their children hear only the dominant language of the nation in the home.

And as we have seen, it is the connection to the indigenous worldview, the indigenous cosmology — a cosmology that the world needs at this moment — which is lost when an indigenous language is lost. I would, therefore, turn the premise in the title on its head: rather than "for a globalised world, the fewer languages the better", I would argue that to guarantee the future of a truly globalised world, and to truly combat the climate crisis, every language in the world needs to be considered with equal importance. With bedfellows including the Pope, the Secretary General of the United Nations, and the curators of 80 per cent of the world's biodiversity, I am in good company here.

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