

WHY GUARDING LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IS VITAL FOR OUR LIBERTY

This essay is dedicated to separatism

(I) Language diversity and the mind

A scene was mentioned in the Austrian traveller Henrich Herrer's memoir *Seven Years in Tibet* about the author's first meeting with the fourteen years old Dalai Lama in Lhasa:

'He asked my age and was surprised to learn that I was only thirty-seven. Like many Tibetans he thought that my "yellow" hair was a sign of age. He studied my features with childish curiosity and teased me about my long nose, which, though of normal size as we reckon noses, had often attracted the attention of the snub-nosed Mongolians. At last he noticed that I had hair growing out the back of my hands and said with a broad grin, "Henrig, you have hair like a monkey!" I had an answer ready, as I was familiar with the legend that the Tibetans derive their descent from the union of their god Chenrezi (i.e. Avalokitesvara) with a female demon. Before coupling with his demon lover, Chenrezi had assumed the shape of a monkey, and since the Dalai Lama is one of the Incarnations of this god, I found that in comparing me with an ape he had really flattered me. With remarks such as this, our conversation soon became unconstrained, and we both lost our shyness.' (*Chapter 15 Tutor to the Dalai Lama – Seven Years in Tibet*, translated from German to English by Richard Graves)

Similar to the Tibetan language, in Chinese naughty children, as well as quick-tempered adults may be compared to monkeys in humorous ways with no demeaning intent. Being naughty and quick-tempered was drawn from monkeys' characters to give the word 'monkey' its connotations in the Chinese language, while in English, the word 'monkey' is given a less kind connotation emphasising monkey's alleged quality of being less advanced than human.

Language packs multiple meanings into a single word. Sometimes these meanings are related, for example, the word 'warm' when indicating temperature and when indicating 'loving and caring'; while in other occasions these meanings are unrelated, for example, the word 'too' when representing 'also', and when representing 'excessively'. The packing of meanings into words and phrases increases the efficiency of languages, for example, 'crocodile's tears' implying more than crocodile's tears, thus saving those unspoken words; moreover, it is a clever way to capture some more elusive feelings, for example 'pins and needles' denoting more than pins and needles; or more abstractive concepts, for example, in the phrase 'wake up', 'fall asleep', 'shape up', 'fall in love', the direction 'up' is linked to the state of mind of being conscious and alert, while the direction 'down (fall)' is linked to vigilance yielding to feelings and emotions, thus not only capture the more abstractive concepts of sense versus feeling, but also give the language user a hint of value judgement.

The amusement a Chinese speaker may feel when hear an English-speaking Chinese learner mixing the word 'hair' with the word 'pubic hair' – out of the mode of thinking shaped in the English language where the word 'hair' is shared by the two different body parts, may be compared to the amusement an English speaker may feel when hear a Chinese-speaking English learner mixing the word 'finger' with 'toe' out of the same reason. Each language packs meanings into words in its unique way, embodying its phonetic, philological, and grammatical originality, encoding the social structure and values from which it has grown from, emphasising the connections between some real-world facts linked up by a word or phrase, at the inevitable expense of obscuring or ignoring other possible connections between one real-world element to another. Language, as a symbol system, reorganises the world in its users' conscience,

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enlightening some parts of the world, while concealing other parts of it.

An example is the extremely popular but infinitely confusing term ‘left’ versus ‘right’. On contentious social and political issues we have become used to see fierce debate, sometimes polarisation in community, between the ‘leftists’ and the ‘rightists’. People throw themselves and others, even historical figures such as Hitler and Stalin, into one of the two catalogues, while the meanings of the labels are so broad and vague. In the United States (USA), the word ‘liberal’ resonates with ‘leftist’ and the social progressives; but in Australia, the same word echoes ‘rightist’, thanks to the conservative Liberal Party, while in the Britain and Canada, the word ‘liberal’ has kept more of its classical meaning as outlined in books such as John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*. If one English word cannot be assumed as having the same meaning in different English-speaking regions, the situation can only be more confusing when words spread from one into another language. For the Chinese, the concept ‘left versus right’ used to be a foreign one, but today the debate between the ‘leftists’ and ‘rightists’ are as fierce as in the English speaking countries. But an English ‘leftist’ may find her/himself comfortably at home among the Chinese ‘rightists’ because the word ‘rightist’ in the Chinese context is roughly equivalent to ‘civil libertarian’, including both economic libertarian (‘rightist’ in the English context), and social libertarian, even environmentalists (‘leftist’ in the English context), and most important of all, those who stand for individual rights, balance of power, and oppose to totalitarianism; while under the ‘leftists’ umbrella, are the Communist Party regime supporters, Mao Tse-tung lovers, North Korea admirers, but also ironically, radical nationalists, Han chauvinists, racists and sexists – what in the English context is called the ‘far-right’. In short, ‘left versus right’ can be roughly translated from the Chinese context to English as ‘collectivism versus individualism’.

Such is the degree to which a language can distort, rather than illuminate, conceal from, rather than reveal for us the complexity of our world and our society. If a language has been invented by an octopus, the term ‘left’ and ‘right’ would probably not be in her dictionary, as she has more than just the left and right hand. If she has indeed given a distinctive name to each of her tentacles, and associate those names to different political persuasions, her language is probably more comprehensive in describing social/political ideologies than human’s poor ‘left versus right’ analogy. In her paradigm Hitler and Stalin will find their places, put at the two opposing ends of the political spectrum in human’s language, this time represented by two tentacles sitting next to each other in her circle of hands, in the direction called ‘collectivists’.

For us humans, although the want of eight tentacles contributed to the poverty of our languages in illustrating our range of political ideologies, and the shared ‘collectivist’ attributes between the ‘far leftists’ and ‘far rightists’ was obscured by the very names they were given by our language – we are fortunate enough to have more than one language, one society, one country, and one people. When our words – ‘package of meanings’, become bondage of our thoughts; when the persistent tendency of human societies toward sectarianism and partisan grandstanding – due to individuals’ natural inclination of disagreeing one another but at the same time trying to take cover behind a powerful group for self-protection – are fossilised in our ambiguous dualistic jargons: ‘left’ versus ‘right’, ‘Catholics’ versus ‘Protestants’, ‘Sunnis’ versus ‘Shias’, ‘east’ versus ‘west’; when our language is so entangled with such heartbeat-speeding, blood-boiling references, connotations, colours, and emotions that it rendered its users incapable of thinking inside reality instead of inside a box, we still have the luxury of breaking away from one’s native language completely and venturing into another. The change-of-environment must be so radical that an individual from the

dogmatism-ridden community find that the very word ‘Catholics’, ‘Protestants’, ‘Sunnis’ or ‘Shias’ do not even exist in the new culture, she or he may be forced to start a process of rethinking and decomposing the coded meanings from her/his native languages’ vocabulary and checking each of those subsidiary elements against reality – as she/he learns and translates from and to, a new language, and travels back and forth between the native and that alien language. If we wish to continue to have this luxury, we must cherish and defend our disappearing reservoir of diverse languages.

(II) Language diversity and totalitarianism

In the middle of World War II, after fleeing from Nazi Germany to New Zealand, Karl Popper observed how a totalitarian regime’s attempt to monopolise every aspects of people’s life went hand in hand with an attempt to monopolise the ownership of a language. In refuting a pro-Nazi scholar methodology Popper termed ‘methodological essentialism’ and promoting the opposite attitude he called ‘methodological nominalism’, Popper said:

‘...methodological nominalism sees the aim of science in the description of the things and events of our experience, and in an ‘explanation’ of these events...And it sees in our language, and especially in the rules which distinguish properly constructed sentences and inferences from a mere heap of words, the great instrument of scientific description; words it considers rather as subsidiary tools for this task, and not as names of essences. The methodological nominalist will never think that a question like ‘What is energy?’ or ‘What is movement?’ or ‘What is an atom?’ is an important question for physics; but he will consider important a question like: ‘How can the energy of the sun be made useful?’ or ‘How does a planet move?’ or ‘Under what condition does an atom radiate light?’ And to those philosophers who tell him that before having answered the ‘what’ question he cannot hope to give exact

answers to any of the ‘how’ questions, he will reply, if at all, by pointing out that he much prefers that modest degree of exactness which he can achieve by his methods to the pretentious muddle which they have achieved by theirs.’ –
— *The Open Society and Its Enemies (Volume I Chapter 3)* – Karl Popper

One of the basic defences in favour of individualism, diversity, free thinking, and an open society is that our existing knowledge about our world is not only incomplete, patchy, random, but also imperfect, flawed, is open to challenge and trial and error, therefore no individual or authority can claim monopoly to the truth and dictate the way forward for others. Collectivists, on the other hand, are always tempted to justify their ‘order’ of society with a metaphysical ‘order of the natural world’ – in which they are meant to be on the top. By pretending one single language – a mere imperfect symbol system designed to reflect upon the world – to be universal, complete, scientific, and flawless, dictators think that can help to disguise the fact that their knowledge about the world are just as patchy, random and imperfect as ours; and help to replace, by stealth, the largely unknown ‘order’ of our world – if there is any order at all, with a ‘known order’ of the little universe for our thoughts in our minds – our language. In recent history alone, we have seen enough enslavement, totalitarianism, assimilation, and genocide, either in domestic dictatorships or in aggression, went hand in hand with efforts to eliminating language diversity.

From Spanish’s burning of Native American books, Anglo’s assimilation in America and Australia, the British, French and Japanese practice of hanging ‘Welsh nots/symboles/dialect cards (方言札)’ to the neck of individuals who spoke a suppressed language to purposely humiliate and abuse the individual, to the Chinese language policy after the annexation of Tibet and Uyghur land, where Uyghur pupils are fined 10 yuan (1.66 USA dollars) for speaking the Uyghur language in school, examples are plenty. When the Chinese

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and the Europeans met in the 19th century, they described each other as ‘barbarians’. They were both right, judged by the language genocide they have unleashed upon the civilisations they conquered. During the years when Lysenkoism, the pseudoscientific interference into Soviet Union’s scientific research, was condoned and encouraged by Stalin, a concurrent effort by the regime was to replace the diverse writing systems in the Soviet sphere – Arabic, Georgian, Mongolian script alphabets – with Cyrillic script alphabets.

Totalitarianism hates the unknown. A dictator’s main interest may be in stemming out diverse social thoughts only, but he cannot refrain from meddling in natural science either – due to the crucial influence social thoughts can receive from developments in natural science. Therefore advancement in natural science need to be stemmed if it has threatening implications to the elite in the existing social power structure. Similarly, as languages are not only the medium to convey our thoughts, but also a vital raw material for building them, a totalitarian regime seeing the diversity of thoughts as a danger, naturally also see the diversity of the raw materials available for building them – the diversity of languages – as a danger, a threat from ‘the unknown’, a risk of increase in ‘chances’ and ‘possibilities’ – which a totalitarian hates the most.

(III) Language diversity and our liberty

But having an universal language, it may be argued, must not be all that bad. If the people of Somalia or North Korea, for instance, were made to learn English, thus having access to the higher values and rich ideas embodied in the English language, wouldn’t that be beneficial to them in building a society less brutal than they currently have? If the whole planet opts English, for instance, as its sole language, thus make an Inuit woman from Greenland communicate freely with an Indigenous Anangu man from central Australia, wouldn’t that reduce the cost of communication, misunderstanding, even hatred? Although no language is perfect, English,

as a language of science, culture, social improvement, surely is not that far from flawless. Owing to a great tradition of scholarship, the English speaking people have already translated the most important books from other languages and absorbed their most useful wisdoms. If we can have scholars translate the rest of any non-English books of any value into English, and organise linguists to muster all the remaining grammatical values from non-English languages into English, to copy the ‘connections’ those languages have created between real world elements, thus create a flawless universal language based on English for all humanities, would not this be great?

Fatal mistakes are present in this seemingly harmless suggestion, of which I can only outline the most important three, to keep the length of this essay checked.

Firstly, the ‘connections’ between real world elements each language has highlighted (and obscured) in its users’ conscience can hardly be replicated into a different language. The reason is that more often than not real-world elements are either linked up or disconnected by words – not even by the words’ logical or metaphorical connections – which might be replicable, but by the purely coincidental similarity of sounds and shapes. Puns are examples of this. In our languages, each word has many attributes: its tone, its vowel, its consonant, its meaning, its emotional undertone, its cultural connotation, the image of its writing form, etc. Some words may not be related in their meanings, but may be similar in their pronunciations; some other words may be related in their literal meanings, but differ greatly in their nuances or emotional colours. This subtle ‘underground network’ among words forms one of the most important bases of verbal humour in most languages – creating ridiculous effects using the subtle ‘underground network’ among words. But they do also influence the language user’s worldview in more substantive ways.

Again drawing example from the two languages I am most familiar with, Chinese and English, Chinese words have single syllables, while most

English words have multiple syllables; Chinese is a ‘tone language’, although English is not generally considered a tone language, tones do exist in English, for example, in the below excerpt from Arthur Golding’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

‘Now have I brought a work to end which
neither Jove's fierce wrath,
Nor sword, nor fire, nor fretting age with all the
force it hath

Are able to abolish quite. Let come that fatal
hour
Which saving of this brittle flesh, hath over me
no power,

And at his pleasure make an end of mine
uncertain time.
Yet shall the better part of me assured be to
climb

Aloft above the starry sky. And all the world
shall never
Be able for to quench my name. For look how
far so ever

The Roman empire by the right of conquest shall
extend,
So far shall all folk read this work. And time
without all end

If poets as by prophecy about the truth may aim
My life shall everlastingly be lengthened still by
fame.
(Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.984-95, tr. Golding)

The first, third, fifth and sixth segment end in words with oblique tones, while the second and the fourth segment end in words with level tones. Tones in Chinese function in a similar, but more complex way. In the Mandarin dialect, each word is given one from four tones, while in Cantonese, each word possesses one of the nine tones. In poetry, each line can only use a specified number of words, tone requirement is pre-set not only for the last word, but for each word in every line – all in the name of pleasure to the ears; moreover, in the corresponding positions in odd numbered and even numbered

lines, words contrasting in both sounds and meanings, are expected to ‘pair up’ each other, for instance, in a couplet ‘the mountain of books has a way, and diligence makes the path; the sea of learning has no edge, and effort builds the raft’, ‘the mountain of books’ is paired up with ‘the sea of learning’, ‘has a way’ is paired up with ‘has no edge’, ‘diligence makes the path’ is paired up with ‘effort builds the raft’. Books were written on the study of metre and rhyming, literati enjoyed losing themselves in this labyrinth, and this mode of thinking did trickle down to the general folk, for whom, a well written couplet hung on the house’s doorposts is deemed fine decoration, a political or social statement embodying the poetry ideal of harmony of sounds and ‘pairing up’ of meanings implies eloquence, persuasion, even trust worthiness and authority.

This time-honoured thinking mode can be seen in the expression of three sets of distinct China policies by three consecutive Taiwanese governments from 1996 to 2014. In an established multi-party democracy, Taiwan’s government, headed by a president, is directly elected every four years, and since the 1990s has to form competitive China policies due to that militarily hostile state’s economic boom, and its ‘magnet effect’ to Taiwan’s big businesses and the negative impact to Taiwan’s small businesses and labour market. The three sets of distinct China policies were expressed as follows:

戒急用忍，行穩至遠

‘Exercise constraint, steadily reach the long-term end’

(The Nationalist KMT Party’s government 1996-2000)

積極開放，有效管理

‘Open up actively, regulate effectively’

(The Democratic Progressive Party’s government 2000-2008)

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以臺灣為主，對人民有利

‘Keep Taiwan’s interests focal, be beneficial to the people’

(The Nationalist KMT Party’s government 2008-present)

In each of the three statements, the policy focus is expressed in the first half of the rhetoric, i.e.

‘exercise constraint’, ‘open up’, and ‘keep the national interests focal’, but without colluding with each other, three governments formed by two competing political parties unanimously chose to ‘pair up’ their main rhetoric with a ‘supplement’ section to balance and to complete the first half.

This is an example of political statements written up to suit the nation’s subconscious thinking habit of looking for ‘pairing up’ of meanings, which is the result of the poetry tradition thoroughly blended into the folk culture, and the poetry tradition itself, is a characteristic expression of this single syllable based tone language. The resultant thinking mode has its merits – subconsciously looking for a supplement or a balance to ‘pair up’ the main argument, for example, is not a bad habit for critical thinking. But it also has its downside – possessing poetic quality and harmony of sounds does not make a statement true. All these causes and effects cannot really be transplanted into another language – as a ‘global language’ proponent may suggest, therefore the Chinese language as a whole, cannot replace or be replaced by another language, but needs to be supplemented and balanced by other diverse languages.

In his book ‘*The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* – Princeton University Press 2007’, David W. Anthony discussed the extinct Hopi language. Unlike grammar in the English language that ‘force its user to specify whether the event occurred in the past, is happening now, or will happen in the future’, grammar in the Hopi language ‘force its user to specify whether the

speaker has witnessed the event herself/himself, has heard about it from another person, or presumes that the event has occurred’. Even if a particular valuable grammatical feature may be replicable from Hopi into English, in theory, the cost to make the change accepted by all English speakers is high in practice. And to transplant the intricate ‘underground networks’ among words from one language into another, simply cannot be achieved regardless of the cost. If we truly want to reduce the cost of communication and reduce misunderstanding, instead of the futile exercise of creating, or competing to become, an universal ‘perfect language’, which create nothing but bigotry, our efforts is much better spent in assisting our future generations to become multilingual.

Moreover, to impose English, Chinese, or any language, as a global language will cause great loss of intelligence not only through depriving humanity of perspectives, of diverse angles in observing the world and creating new knowledge, but also through depriving future generations access to existing knowledge, because knowledge in the social and humanities field can hardly be digested through translation.

Without learning a foreign language, when reading human stories from another culture through translation only, we are often troubled by a shroud of mystery over the people in that society: we feel their thinking less rational, their behaviour less logical, and their emotion less comprehensible than our own. In fact at least a great part of this misreading is due to our own insulation from the ‘underground network’ of words in that foreign language. To detect the subtlety of intentions and emotions of another human being in our own culture, to grasp the undercurrents in our own society, we know how important it is to be able to sense the nuances in words, to be able to ‘read between the lines’. But when a sentence is translated from one language into another, even high quality translation can only ensure the ‘literal’ or ‘principle’ meaning is conveyed correctly, while most, if not all of the connotations, undertones, puns, meaning of names are ignored.

(Surnames, for instance, Abbot, Butcher, Butler, Carter, Cook, Dean, Fisher, Gardener, King, Knight, Miller, Pope, Potter, Smith, Stone, Tailor, all have meanings, but when being translated into another language, either the meaning is sacrificed for retaining the sound, or vice versa.) The result is that we cannot understand why the people in that translated human story were amused, displeased, provoked, alerted, or reacted in whatever way they did. We are bound to be ill-informed by even good quality translations, but a more probable result of studying historical and contemporary human stories from another society through translation only, is the general loss of interest in doing so altogether, due to the feeling of frustration, inaccessibility, and ambiguity in the process.

Without foreign sources in foreign languages, we cannot even understand the history written by our own forebears in our own language. Throughout history, when the name ‘Tibet’ and ‘Uyghur’ were translated from different foreign sources by the Chinese, they were translated into different Chinese names, despite that the subject matter was the same. Similarly, were the Moslems, Muslims, Mohammedans and Mahometans mentioned in English historical accounts the same group of people? It cannot be known unless referring to foreign language sources. Without the continuous existence of diverse languages, a future English reader may read in her/his history book that in the 1980s the USA assisted a group of freedom fighters called the ‘Mujahideens’ to expel the Soviet empire from Afghanistan, and two decades later, a group of terrorists called the ‘Jihadists’ engaged in a bitter war against the USA on the same land. This English reader can be forgiven feeling confused – Where did the ‘Jihadists’ come from? When did they take power from the Mujahideens? And where did the Mujahideens go? Were the Mujahideens annihilated or expelled by the Jihadists from the country? And when did this happen? The answer is simple: both words ‘Mujahideen’ and ‘Jihadists’ have their roots in the Arabic language, in which the prefix ‘mu-’ functions in the same way as the suffix ‘-ist’ does in English in forming

nouns describing persons, while the suffix ‘-een’ functions in the same way as the suffix ‘-s’ does in English in forming plurals, therefore ‘Mu-jahid-eeen’ means ‘people who believe in and practice Jihad’, i.e. Jihadists. Thus ‘Mujahideen’ and ‘Jihadist’ are but two different English translations of the same Arabic word: مجاهدين (Mujahideen), and the ‘Mujahideens’ and the ‘Jihadists’ are the one and the same group of people. That English reader’s view on this period of history may be greatly altered when she/he becomes aware of such facts.

Lastly, in a homogeneous planet where only one (or a handful of) language remain, after losing diverse standpoints in catching new knowledge, being incapable of absorbing wisdoms from most cultures that had existed in the past, and holding on only half-baked understanding of her own history, the remaining language is likely to stumble, bringing down with her the humanity – as history has shown again and again, societies in isolation stagnate, if not degenerate. Imagine suffering from an illness that causes you to wake up every morning not remembering anything that happened the day before – you will not make improvement as you cannot learn from the past. If we regard our society as a person, the natural condition of our society is alike a person suffering from this syndrome. Because regardless of how advanced and rich in knowledge a society is, each new generation is born as ignorant as the newborn from the most primitive tribes ten thousand years ago. Knowledge isn’t passed down by birth, and being smarter than the previous generation is never a given. This can partly explain why societies regarded as ‘civilised’ and rich with culture can revert to barbarism overnight – in the 20th century alone, we witnessed this happening in Germany, China, and many other places. No civilisation is immune from such degeneration.

What’s less dramatic but occurs still more often, is stagnation – stagnation caused by a series of rational decisions that incrementally stifle the society and block all future opportunities/possibilities. Without defending

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diversity, a free market, after a series of rational commercial decisions, regresses into syndicate or monopoly. Without defending diversity, the Russian nationalist vigilantes have turned seemingly ‘tolerable’ paedophile-hunt into violent homosexual-bashing, which feed into a bigger picture of state-sanctioned thuggery against any nonconforming groups and dissenting intellectuals. Without defending diversity, in the heat of debate against the ‘intelligent design’ proponents in the USA, even the most unassuming scientific community may have adopted a self-defeating strategy: asserting science’s authority, while the real disagreement between scientists and creationists is not on human’s origin per se, but on whether any theory is entitled to claiming infallibility, while at the same time demanding a mentioning in science classes. Should the creationists insist, their theory may well be welcome into the science class, taught side by side with the evolution theory, on the condition that it’s taught only as the *Old Testament* hypothesis, and all the scientific evidences for and against the *Bible* presented. On the other hand, asking question such as ‘how can you question scientific conclusions as facts?’ is turning science into religion by denying science her very nature of openness, falsifiability, and anti-authority.

All these real instances show that a series of rational, even well-meant decisions, can accumulatively steer our society towards stagnation. The openness and tolerance of a society that we have often taken for granted, are in fact hung in a delicate balance of powers, and when the balance is tipped over, our society slides towards the opposite. It’s not coincidental that those once ahead-of-the-world civilisations, Mesopotamia, India, Egypt, China, Greece, all failed in escaping stagnation. If the humanity as a whole has so far avoided stagnation, it’s due to the relatively rich diversity – despite our careless squander – that we still enjoy so far. The richly diversified cultural entities, tribes, nations, countries, provided each other with an extra balance from outside. The strongest safeguard that scientists in the USA may find against the possibility of one day being persecuted by religious fanaticism in their own country, does

not lie on the *American Constitution*, but on the lack of monotheist fanaticism in other countries such as Russia, China, Japan, India – not all of these countries being liberal and tolerant, some of them are even rogue and authoritarian – but it’s the relative high esteem scientists enjoy in these competitor countries that give scientists in the USA certain assurance of the lack of prospect their country walking onto the self-destructive path of religious fanaticism in the near future.

It is the existence of ‘the other’, who is different from ‘me’, that stimulates the mental efforts of comparing, imitating, remembering, rival, and reasoning. Without the presence of ‘the other’, any individual or any society’s mental condition would be much less curious, inquisitive, alert, and active in general. To continue with an example that has been mentioned earlier in this essay, unlike the English language in which the direction ‘up’ is linked to ‘awake’, while ‘down (fall)’ is linked to ‘asleep’, the Chinese language links the state of awake with the location ‘here’ and the state of asleep with the location ‘there’, as shown in the expression ‘醒過來’ and ‘睡過去’ roughly meaning ‘wake back’ and ‘sleep away’, hence give an alternative perception of the subject ‘consciousness’. In another example, the suffix ‘-cide’ in English, from the Latin word ‘caedere’ meaning ‘to cut, to sever’, shared by a range of words such as ‘homicide’, ‘genocide’, ‘suicide’, ‘regicide’, ‘pesticide’, is also given to the word ‘decide’, thus extend from the act of ‘cutting, severing’ to a more abstractive thinking process: ‘deciding’. This linguistic phenomena is not unique in English: in Arabic, the word قطع qid’a, meaning ‘to cut, to sever’ gives a derivative word: قاطع qad’a, meaning ‘decisive, conclusive’; and in Chinese, the word 斷 duàn, meaning ‘to sever, to cut’, gives a number of derivatives including 斷定 duàn-dìng, meaning ‘to conclude’ 決斷 jué-duàn, meaning ‘to decide’ 判斷 pàn-duàn, meaning ‘to judge’, 了斷 liǎo-duàn, meaning ‘to finish, to end’. In three unrelated

languages, words' meanings are extended and new words derived following a common mental process: from the obvious to abstractive, from the tangible to metaphorical. Without 'the other' languages, we cannot gain real insight into even our own language. It's the existence of 'the other' that brings human minds and cultures, separated by geography and bias, into mutual allusion.

It's true that modern-day tyrants have used 'diverse values' and 'cultural uniqueness' as excuse for domestic human rights abuses, and out of disgust of such whitewash of atrocities, 'western value' defenders may have gone so far as asserting diversity must be sacrificed for the sake of human rights. But as any words from dictators, their professed love of 'diverse values' should not be taken for granted. We must notice that despite tyrants' pretend 'love', diverse values are the very things that they suppress hard at home. Dictatorships do not thrive because of diversity, on the contrary, thanks to diversity, tyranny is contained in our world and prevented from spreading widely. Every culture can and have – in various periods of their history – independently expressed ideas that cherish freedom, compassion, liberty, and individuality. If we insist that a cruel nation in which rebellion against the ruler means being hung, drawn and quartered, for women, burnt on the stake, makes that culture to deserve to cease and that national language to deserve to extinct, we must keep in mind that's the kind of nation in which enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke lived but three centuries ago. Most of our diverse languages have a history of thousands, if not tens of thousands of years. To dismiss any of them as unfit to survive, unworthy of preservation – due to but one century's record of failure, is like disqualifying a marathon competitor for temporarily lagging behind the frontrunner, like punishing a student with death for failing one subject, which is in itself a very tyrannical thought. Can we say categorically, for instance, that reptiles are 'less evolved' and 'inferior' than mammals, therefore deserve to die out? Imagine when Darwin set foot on the Galápagos Islands, instead of giant tortoises and

iguanas, saw sheep, rabbits and foxes, the theory of evolution itself may not become a part of our knowledge until centuries later when the fossils of iguanas and giant tortoises are discovered and studied by some future great minds – provided that the society in which they live still allow the growth of great minds. A cancer cell, for instance, is surely more energetic, adaptive, successful and fit for survival than other cells, but its taking over of the diversity of body cells is followed by the demise of the body, including the cancer cell itself. Our leaky house of diversity may not provide a perfect shelter against the winter, and it's tempting to believe that by burning it down, we might enjoy one warmer night. This may be true: in the first few decades when one or a handful of languages take over the globe and replace the hundreds and thousands of languages, there may well be an explosion of knowledge creation, a short 'golden age', which is created by individuals from all the diverse societies pouring their nations' reserve of experiences and knowledge into the dominant language, as the English language has been privileged enough to be at the receiving end in the past century. But when the multilingual generation die out, the vivid memories that resonate with their contemporary readers as their books being read will not appear in the future monolingual generations' mind, their works, even if still read, cannot be understood. When the ember of the burnt house die down, the world is deprived shelter against degeneration, and the homogeneous global community left is probably more alike today's North Korea and Somalia, than the USA and Europe.

In an antique period in the Chinese history called the 'warring states', when an intellectual whose thought put himself at odds with the ruler could flee to another ruler's turf where standards for judging 'heresy' was different, 'hundreds schools of thoughts' emerged and formed the cornerstones of Chinese philosophy and the Chinese people's self-identities until today. In the English-speaking world, John Locke who ran into political trouble at home sought asylum on the continent, while Friedrich Hayek and Karl Popper's took refuge

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in Britain from persecution by the Nazis in Austria. Not only the fragmentation of power in Europe provided these liberal thinkers a shelter, but also made it possible that fresh lessons learnt from one failed state were quickly brought to another, warning the latter the danger of travelling on the same path, thus steering its course away from it. Even today, Julian Assange may share the same fate with Bradley Manning should there be one 'world government' only, and paradoxically it's the shelter provided by the unsavoury Chinese and Russian regimes to Edward Snowden that gave the public in Europe and America a chance to hold their authorities back from becoming rogue. And the restrained western governments in turn, keep the human rights in Russia and China checked and balanced, by providing a contrast and a reference point, and prevent the standard in Russia and China from sliding even further. If we choose to think that the natural tendency of human society is to progress, not to stagnate or regress, or if we think that our world is bad enough that it cannot be any worse, we are taking comforts from self-deception. It's the existence of the fragmentation of powers and diversity of societies that prevent each of them from becoming even worse than they already are. At the end of the day, it's not the continuous tolerance and benevolence of any one power that's reassuring for individualists and freedom lovers everywhere, but the fragmentation of powers.

In his work *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill passionately defended individuality – even in the occasional event of its conflicting with progress. The reason, as he so well put: 'the only unfailing and permanent source of improvement is liberty, since by it there are as many possible independent centres of improvement as there are individuals.' And I trust it may also be said that: 'the only unfailing and permanent source of improvement is language diversity, since by it there are as many possible independent centres of improvement as there are languages.'

If we imagine the conversation within a teahouse, a hotel lobby or a tourist group as a miniature of our social conversation, should all the members speak the same language and spend time

together long enough, they are likely to move to tables according to their formed opinion, taste, education and background and form silos, and these silos are likely to stay. From this point of time, there would be one and only one story of the interaction between these formed silos. As in any homogeneous society, the lowest common denominator, by its very nature, is likely to gather most of the popularity and the 'negative principle of selection' that Friedrich Hayek described in his book *The Road to Serfdom* is likely to manifest itself. But when different languages exist, people, despite of their similarity in opinion, taste, education and background, may be prevented from forming one large group due to language barriers. They may still form smaller silos within their language group, but even after silos are formed, there would be many different stories of interactions between the formed silos in the many different language groups – that is, the existence of many possibilities. Possibilities are the best things an open society has to offer, and possibilities are also the best protection upon which an open society can depend for its survival. If we accept that our overall knowledge of our world, despite great advances, is still incomplete, patchy, random, imperfect, and flawed, if we agree that each of our new generation is still born ignorant of even these existing knowledge, then in the uncertain future, when half-witted believes, religious or political fanaticism, new age myths and modern day superstitions storm across the planet, as the capitalist versus communist, leftist versus rightist ideologies did, mere breakup of political entities, such as that in the Arabic speaking, English speaking and Spanish speaking countries, is not enough to withstand the strike. Only total separation of identities and language barriers, not just a handful, but hundreds and thousands of language barriers, can serve to contain the damage, to stimulate the mental process of reality-checking, to keep the many possibilities alive, and to keep our liberties alive.

4 September 2013

14 November 2013 – 19 January 2014

3 February 2014