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LANGUAGES AND PEACE

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Language and languages

There is almost unanimous agreement that language is the chief distinguishing feature of the human species, the one that sets us apart from the higher animals, a characteristic linked in turn to intelligence and the capacity for abstract thought, and we can therefore say that language is our chief instrument of knowledge. But while the capacity for language is directly linked to intelligence, it is also true that language is our chief means of communication with others. Our entire relational existence, our entire social life, depends largely on language. However, and this is the paradox, though language as an instrument of knowledge is common to the entire human species, as a means of communication it nevertheless only allows communication between people speaking the same language. Language is a skill which only actually materialises in different languages.

The paradox is so powerful and so surprising—why do we not all speak the same language?—that in the opening pages of the Bible we are offered a symbolic interpretation. The first inhabitants of the earth, led by their pride, tried to raise a tower that would reach to heaven. God reminded them of their frailty by confusing their speech so that whereas until then they had only spoken one language they now spoke many. I shall return to the meaning of this interpretation later. For now I shall merely point out that from a strictly naturalistic point of view diversity is not so difficult to explain.

Even if we imagine that the history of the human species begins with a primitive group in which everyone speaks the same language, in the course of time this original language would evolve for reasons inherent to society itself. So long as speakers of a language stay together, they all share in the evolution of their language, but if speakers scatter because some move away and settle in a nearby valley or a distant island, the language will evolve differently in each place and will eventually make mutual understanding difficult. Processes of this sort, kept up for hundreds of centuries, are enough to explain today's diversity. Furthermore, we need to bear in mind that linguistic changes are closely related to the evolution of the society speaking each language and to its culture, to the extent that we can say that language reflects or expresses the culture of the people speaking it.

So far I have referred only to isolation as an explanation for linguistic differences; however, isolation is never total, there have always been contacts between populations and between the languages they speak and the cultures expressed through them. And these contacts have not always been peaceful and mutually enriching.

The history of humanity can to a large extent be told as a history of conflicts and war and in many cases the opposing sides spoke different languages and language has often appeared as the cause of conflict or as a symbol of opposition. The reason is not hard to find. As I have just said, a language is a vehicle of communication between its speakers, but at the same time it establishes a border between them and those who do not speak or understand it. The speaker of a language we do not understand it is, in principle, the other, whose thoughts and aims we do not know and who is therefore seen as a possible threat or as an enemy. This is why the presence of more than one language in a single political space is seen as a factor of differentiation and lack of stability and therefore as a source of possible conflicts; monolingualism, on the other hand, speaking the same

language, would appear to guarantee stability.

So it is not surprising that all the great empires have aspired to rewind the story of the Tower of Babel and get back to the situation in which all humans spoke the same language, which was the perfect language, the language received directly from God. But as the Bible passage itself makes clear, the story of Babel cannot be rerun. Humans broke their alliance with God; from that moment they had to learn to live with linguistic diversity and cooperate in spite of the differences. This, as I say, is not an easy lesson to learn.

How can we ensure that differences in language are not a factor of conflict so much as one of understanding and collaboration?

The rights of linguistic communities

Experts in the subject say that between five and six thousand languages are spoken in the world today. Contrary to what one might think, they also say that they are all of similar complexity, that they are all equally evolved and that they are all capable of expressing the same levels of complexity. And at the same time, each and every one of them are a result of a collective experience maintained over the course of time; they all therefore express a particular culture and they all have a value which in some way is unique. They all therefore deserve to continue in existence. Many, though, are endangered and in need of protection. And in many places the dangers involve conflicts.

An initial reason for conflict is the intolerance shown by many states towards their internal linguistic differences. I said above that there are between five and six thousand languages in the world and yet there are only some 200 sovereign states. This means that the majority of states, if not all, include more than one or many, and in many cases very many, different languages in their territory. And at the same time, in our age, the theory of the national states seems to imply that a state must have an official language that is not only the official language of the state but the symbol of national unity, which implies the marginalization of any other languages that may be spoken in the state territory. It is true that this is not always the case, that there are states that have more than one official language and states whose constitutional text recognises their linguistic plurality and the rights of their speakers, but the majority do not do so or do so insufficiently, thereby sowing the seeds of potential conflicts.

The defence of the rights of linguistic minorities as bearers of a culture of their own goes back a long way, especially in Europe after the nineteenth century, when language became the chief sign of group identity. Linguistic demands linked to political demands are plentiful in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but there are nevertheless still linguistic minorities that suffer discrimination and marginalization. For some time, claims referring to specific cases have been joined by opinion groups and institutional proposals for defining the rights of linguistic minorities. A good example of this is the Charter of Regional or Minority Languages proposed by the Council of Europe in 1991, which has since been signed and ratified by a large number of European states and which foresees a system for monitoring and controlling the extent to which it is implemented in signatory states.

In a rapid summary limited to its strictly linguistic aspects, we can sum up its demands by saying that states must guarantee linguistic minorities existing in their territory not only the right to use their language but the right to maintain its existence, and this means first of all their presence in the educational system and in the written and audiovisual media, demands to which must today be added their presence in computer systems.

This last point forces us to take into account a new fact. The rapid development of technology in our time is producing a process of globalisation on a planetary scale. Not only can people and produce be rapidly moved from anywhere to anywhere else, but the information available in one place can be immediately handled somewhere else. This globalisation of information favours globalisation of the economy and this whole process of globalisation in turn has repercussions for language.

The first obvious consequence is that it reinforces the role of the most widespread languages, which become languages for international communication, far exceeding the area in which they are the population's first language. This means that a very large part of the world's population is led increasingly to learn and use foreign languages. At the same time, this strengthening of the main languages weakens others and, as I pointed out a moment ago, linguistic minorities that are struggling for recognition today have more difficulty maintaining their presence in an increasingly computerised world.

It's true that, as once happened with the printing press, which favoured the expansion of the main languages but which also allowed the spread of minor languages, computer tools properly used can strengthen minor languages. In this respect, what is happening in Catalonia in this field can very well illustrate what other languages can do. But we must not build our hopes up too much. It's true that in the not so distant future voice recognition and automatic translation programs will very possibly allow someone to speak into a microphone in a certain language and have others listen and answer in their own languages, but we must not forget, either, that these programs involve a high cost in research and development that many languages cannot afford.

Forgotten languages

The remark I have just made is a reminder to us that there are many more languages in the world than those spoken by linguistic minorities who struggle to have their rights respected. I said earlier that between five and six thousand different languages are spoken in the world today, but a large part of them are only spoken by a few thousand people, have remained completely isolated and have never had a system of writing or been codified. In New Guinea, in Siberia, in the Amazon basin, there are hundreds of languages like this. When their isolation is broken down the speakers, especially young people, show a powerful urge to acquire languages that will ensure their integration in a wider world and they have little interest in preserving them. Sooner or later this leads to their disappearance.

This disappearance is regrettable in the same way as the disappearance of many plant and animal species is regrettable because they involve an impoverishment of the world we live in, impoverishment of biological variety in one case, impoverishment of cultural

diversity in the case of languages. And this regret is fully justified. All languages, even the smallest, are of a similar complexity, all of them allow speakers to express all their subjective and objective experiences and all of them are an expression of their own specific culture. But we must bear in mind that the problem is more serious and more complicated than respecting the rights of linguistic minorities. In this case it is a question of populations who do not have even the most basic means to take on their defence and who in many cases do not feel the wish to either; this means that survival of the language they speak depends totally on outside help. Only a concerted effort on an international level can offer any hope.

This work, which is often demanded but which so far has not taken shape or been programmed, should start with a description and classification of these languages so as to reduce current ambiguities—published estimates vary between 5,000 and 7,000 different languages in the world. Alongside this, and no less important, would be to propose a typology of the situation they are in and suitable measures for helping them. A job of clarification which would take time and which would have to be accompanied by a regular publication (every five years, for example) by an international organisation—preferably UNESCO—of a report on linguistic diversity in the world and its development. This initiative could be completed with a closer monitoring of certain languages in danger of disappearing used as gauges for developments.

New linguistic conflicts

But the globalisation process, as well as causing the possible disappearance of minor languages, also has other consequences that are no less severe and far more conflictive. Growing population movements produce settings and situations in which speakers of different languages belonging to different cultural traditions come together. Situations of this sort have always arisen to a certain extent but now they are more and more frequent and in more and more parts of the world. As we are in Barcelona, I shall take Barcelona as my example.

In Barcelona and the whole of Catalonia people speak the language of this area, which is Catalan, the language I am speaking now, a Romance language with a brilliant literary past which goes back to the Middle Ages and which for some time has been seeing a rebirth, both literarily and culturally as well as in the political arena. But for many centuries Catalonia and other Catalan-speaking areas have belonged to the Spanish state and in Barcelona, as in the whole of Catalonia, Castilian, or Spanish, is also spoken. The present Spanish Constitution says that the two languages are co-official and the Statute of Catalonia specifies that Catalan is the language of Catalonia and that the two languages are co-official. The most recent linguistic surveys say that half the population of Catalonia uses Catalan as its usual language and half Castilian. This coexistence of two languages in the same area poses problems that the Catalan Government tries to deal with through legal regulations, chiefly the Law of Linguistic Normalisation of 1983. Thus, for example, as regards the educational system the law states that the chief teaching language must be Catalan but that by the end of compulsory education pupils must be able to use both languages. Catalan universities also establish that Catalan is their language but that teaching is carried out in Catalan or Castilian.

Without going into more details on this linguistic policy, what I want to emphasise now is that the linguistic situation in Barcelona is very complex. First of all, Barcelona today is a very cosmopolitan city, a business centre and a tourist resort and the home of cultural events like the Forum that has convened us and where this dialogue is taking place, a city in which people speaking many languages other than those spoken by the residents meet in many places and a variety of situations. It is also true that over the years the people of Barcelona have increased their foreign-language skills. Fifty years ago many people in Barcelona spoke French as their second or third language and today, especially, amongst young people, third place tends to go to English, though this does not solve all the communications problems with people from outside. Since Spain joined the European Union, any citizen of a country in the Union has the right to live and work in Barcelona and many do. And along the coast near Barcelona, the same as on the Costa Brava or the Balearics, many have established their second home. All of them use different languages to the locals and all of them have the right to use the public health services and to send their children to state schools. And all of them have the right to vote in local elections without any of this giving rise to conflicts, even though at times one wonders if in order to vote in local elections it would make sense for the person concerned to show that they can receive information in the language of the country of residence.

And there's more. Barcelona has traditionally received immigrants from other parts of Spain, especially from the south of the Iberian Peninsula, but in recent years it has become the centre of attraction for immigrants from a wide range of places: from Morocco and Latin America, from Eastern Europe and also from the Far East, India and China. Immigrants used to account for 5% of the population of Barcelona but now they make up 10% and are still growing. With the only exception of those from Latin America, they all speak languages that are different from the local languages and both they and their children need coaching to become familiar with the languages used in schools, Catalan and Castilian. Many of them also feel they would like their children to retain their original language. And all of them, or at least those whose legal status is in order, have the right to use public services and these, as far as possible, try to take into account their linguistic handicaps. How far do their linguistic rights extend and what are their duties in this field?

This situation is not exclusive to Barcelona, situations and problems of this sort arise in many of the European regions. Obviously, to help coexistence between European citizens the European Union should long ago have agreed and proclaimed a linguistic policy specifying the linguistic rights and duties of groups and citizens in each situation: local linguistic minorities, minorities speaking the language of a neighbouring country, immigrant populations. This linguistic policy must combine the wish for European integration with respect for linguistic differences.

What I have just said about Europe can also be repeated on a global level. It seems that the time has come for the UN or UNESCO to lay down the general principles of a policy making clear the linguistic rights and duties of states and individuals.

It's true that not everything can be left to grand declarations or legal regulations, however necessary these may be. The civil society itself, themselves often find a way of overcoming the problems that languages can imply for human coexistence. Here again I

shall, if I may, take Barcelona as an example. There are plenty of initiatives in Barcelona for carrying out projects to overcome linguistic differences, and experience shows that the wish for understanding, the wish to work together, helps ease communications between different languages. Where there is a will to get along, the language barrier ceases to exist. And this means I can say that, vice versa, where this will is lacking, understanding is impossible, even when people are speaking the same language. Which brings me to the final, fundamental aspect of this reflection on languages and peace.

The language of dialogue

Language, whatever language one speaks, serves to convey information which in turn makes it possible to adopt and carry out projects in common. But the language of information is never entirely objective; it is always biased in some way and it's also normal for one's interlocutor to have a different point of view. Dialogue must serve to show up and rectify our respective points of view and thereby find a common ground on which collaboration is possible. But this is only possible if this wish to collaborate exists.

What I have just said refers to dialogue amongst individuals, but society is not reduced to individuals who talk amongst themselves; these individuals are structured in groups that have their own interests and their own opinions. The information circulating inside society, the information broadcast by the media and shaping what is known as public opinion are manifestations of the opinions and interests of the different groups, so it's difficult for individuals to form their own personal, independent opinions. Very often in a dialogue between individuals the speakers behave like representatives of groups. When one football club fan talks to a fan of another club the information they supply and the opinions they express are in fact information and opinions current amongst followers of their particular group. Not to mention the case when the speakers are formal representatives of different groups with opposed interests.

From the point of view I take, that of the role of language in communication, what is especially noticeable is that the pressure to defend one's own interests eventually distorts language itself. Not only is the information tendentious but the language itself, the meaning of the vocabulary and the syntax of the discourse are distorted in the service of a particular point of view. It is a well known and often criticised fact that totalitarian political regimes tend to pervert language. But it is not only certain political regimes that do this; to some extent, any attempt at proselytising tends to introduce a language of its own.

These observations are a reminder that dialogue is not always easy, that the language in which the dialogue is established is never neutral, that it is always distorted and often corrupted and that therefore the exchange of information often ends in failure and dialogue only results in the parties reasserting their opposite points of view. But having said that, it is still true that the only way to correct the distortions of language is through language itself and the only way to overcome the shortcomings of dialogue is with more dialogue. So language is still the only way to peace.

But more dialogue does not mean, or does not only mean more numerous and longer dialogues, it means dialogue with the intention of talking, it means exchange of opinions

and of points of view with the intention of advancing along the path of understanding.

We can distinguish three moments or three levels on this path of deeper dialogue.

The first condition needed for dialogue is for the parties to coincide in a physical and virtual space, and just this coming together and the effort it involves in itself makes for better understanding of the other as interlocutor. This understanding is not limited to physical presence, to the 'face to face' situation; dialogue consists largely in offering information to the other about one's own situation and intentions and receiving information from one's interlocutor about their situation and their intentions. To the extent that there is a sincere desire for dialogue, this dialogue must serve to replace the prejudices each party harboured as regards the other with information that is closer to the facts.

The improvement in the information on each side's situations and objectives reveals that in spite of the difference in situations and ultimate objectives there are areas in which collaboration is possible. The practice of dialogue and the collaboration this involves will in turn allow further progress in the mutual understanding of each other's situation and objectives. If I said earlier that the language of the interlocutors is in principle a biased and distorted language, I now add that the practice of dialogue produces more objective language that is closer to the facts.

I am not a dreamer. I know very well what kind of world we live in; I know that most of the dialogues on the big issues separating us, political and social issues on a local level, at state level and on an international level are very difficult dialogues that often go in on ear and out the other. But I also know that it is possible to make progress in the desired direction. The Forum we are taking part in is a good example of what I mean. It has been convened to make dialogue possible, to provoke unusual dialogues between people who have never had the chance to talk together, dialogues on all sorts of issues concerning people today and over which opinions are divided. No-one imagines that when the Forum closes the participants will have reached unanimous agreements. But they will have reflected and in a way they will have advanced along the path of mutual comprehension and understanding.

The utopian function of language

And what is there at the end of this path? What is its ultimate object?

Dialogue taken to the limit should allow us to identify ultimate objectives on which the interlocutors are fully agreed. And a universal dialogue will in this way lead to peace.

So far I have discussed dialogues between interlocutors with different objectives—for example, between defenders of a linguistic minority and representatives of a majority language, or between speakers of a local language and immigrants speaking another language. Dialogue can make it possible to reduce mutual misunderstanding and find a terrain for collaboration. But the more the number of groups and languages and different situations to be taken into account grows, the more difficult dialogue becomes and the more difficult it is to find common ground for understanding. Let alone if we want to

reach proposals that take into account all the linguistic situations that exist in our world. And the same goes for most of the themes of the dialogues at this Barcelona Forum, whether they are differences between religions or ethnic conflicts, the fairer distribution of natural resources or sustainable development. To reach effective solutions on a global scale, all the interlocutors would have to be able to set aside their individual or collective interests and adopt a universal outlook of total generosity. In other words, for this dialogue on a global scale to bear fruit calls not only for a change of opinions but a change of personality.

Isn't this pure utopia? Certainly, but humanity has always lived according to utopian hopes. Perverse utopias of domination and destruction, but also positive utopias such as talking about peace and human solidarity today. So I shall end my talk with some words on utopia, and I feel justified in doing so, first of all, because the subject of my talk is in fact to deal with languages and peace on a universal level, but also for a more profound reason, because utopia is always formulated verbally, a utopia is a form of language.

I started my talk by saying that language is our chief instrument of knowledge and at the same time our chief means of communication. I now add that language also has pragmatic functions, it serves to modify reality and not just because it drives human action but because language is essentially creative.

It is creative in the field of knowledge. Not all of reality is transparent to our reasoning or can be explained scientifically. Many areas of our experience are vague and obscure and can only be expressed on the basis of verbal metaphors and when the metaphor allows us to express verbally what until then was inexpressible we can very well speak of creation. This is and has always been the job of poets. And as regards communication, relations between individuals and between groups are not limited to communicating information allowing the move to action. A loving conversation not only expresses verbally a reality experienced intimately, rather it is the conversation that gives life and form to the loving sentiment in the same way as unfortunate or ill-meant words can kill it.

In the same way, verbal commitment by individuals to respect a pact will bring forth a new social reality. And what about the verbally expressed utopia? Utopia is not a metaphor of an already existing reality and neither does it create a new reality; it is more an impulse for individual or collective action but an action involving a personal renewal that puts solidarity and the common good above the individual's or the group's own interests.

And the utopia of all utopias is peace. Peace amongst individuals, peace amongst peoples, peace amongst languages, because we all of us, each in our own language, sing the same song. The possibility of perpetual peace, of the rule of generosity and solidarity over and above selfishness and war is a creative impulse that crosses the ages and is maintained despite all the failures. It is 'the principle of hope', an impulse that is expressed in words that are necessarily poetic words. Let us say so now in the words of Miquel Martí Pol, the Catalan poet who died recently.

*Reconduïm la vida amb la certesa
De que cap esforç no cau en terra eixorca*

*Dia vindrà en que algú beurà a mans plenes
L'aigua de llum que brolli de les pedres
D'aquest temps nou que ara esculpim nosaltres.*

Let us put life back on course with the certainty
That no effort falls on barren ground
A day will come when someone will drink from cupped hands
The water of light springing from the stones
Of this new age we are sculpting now.