Languages and Spiritual Traditions
Linguistic and Religious Diversity

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In *Language* (1921), Edward Sapir says that “language is the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of unconscious generations”. He goes on to say that certain artists (...) are unconsciously striving for a generalized art language, (...), that is related to the sum of all known languages (...). Their art expression is frequently strained, it sounds at times like a translation from an unknown original—which, indeed, is precisely what it is. These artists—(...)—impress us rather by the greatness of their spirit than the felicity of their art. Their relative failure is of the greatest diagnostic value as an index of the pervasive presence (...) of a larger, more intuitive linguistic medium than any particular language.

We can see resonances in the famous letter written by Lord Chandos to his friend Francis Bacon, by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, presenting the quest and the unease noted by Sapir two decades later:

> When I read that, I knew—not without a pang—that I would write no books either in English or in Latin in the coming year, the years after that, or in all the years of this life of mine. There is only one reason for this, (...) it is that the language in which I might have been granted the opportunity not only to write but also to think is not Latin or English, or Italian, or Spanish, but a language none of whose words is known to me, a language in which inanimate things speak to me and wherein I may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge.

*The Letter of Lord Chandos* has become emblematic of the expression of language’s impotence in experiencing the sacred. This unease has been the traditional perspective from which we tend to look at the relationship between language and spirit, between languages or tongues and spiritual traditions, the experience of emptiness when faced with inexpressible terrain.
But the relationship, or rather the continuity between our communicative instinct, the tension given the limits of language, high poetics and spiritual intuition is not exhausted in that abyss of language addressed by Sapir and von Hofmannsthal; rather it has become one of the metalinguistic issues with the most poetic intensity (and reputation) and a recurring theme in the philosophy of language during the 20th century, as noted by Claudio Magris:

*The Letter of Lord Chandos (...) represents a manifesto of the despair of the word and the ruin of the self in the convulsive, indistinguishable flow of things that can no longer be named or dominated by language. In this respect, that piece is a brilliant condemnation of an exemplary condition of the 20th century.*

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Life becomes embodied in language through tongues or languages. An embodiment which, if successful, results in ideas becoming electrically charged. An inimitable, stubbornly human energy. And this electric truth is most visible at diverse moments of high poetics, which are actually one single moment: of emotional intensity, of spiritual commotion, of highly vibrating thought. In such cases, language is at its limit, loaded with the utmost meaning; a leap from conceptual meaning, from the represented world to the electric language that (re)creates.

*In extreme instances (...) energy consumes meaning the way fire feeds on matter (...) it is within poetic action itself that the meaning is felt to reside*¹.

A certain relationship between poetics and “combustion” that can resonate in our imaginary with mystical lyricism.

*The conclusion should not be that language is an imperfect tool,* says Rowan Williams in *The Edge of Words* (2014), but rather we think, while we read his work, that the best way for language to relate to the world is not by attempting to represent it but by creating it. We could perhaps venture that this is the original “ground rule” for language, with representation, code and information appearing later. But language repudiates its origins² and,

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² ‘The origins of linguistic capacity lie in pitched and differentiated sound allied to gesture.
in extreme cases, this results in caricature; the reduction of language to code, of conversation to information, of literature to stories.

But not only conceptual extremes and caricatures. We can also see that a lot of life is lost in mechanical language, in the factories of empty lives. A historical constant of workers who, at the limit of suffering, salvage their humanity with words loaded with poetic intensity, almost always secretly. A few months ago a report was published on migrant workers in regions of China with the highest pressure on the workforce, who were trying to reduce their existential suffering by writing poems on their mobile phones which they later published online (www.laborpoetry.com).

The report focuses on Xu Lizhi, a worker in Foxconn City, the mega-factory of electronic products located in Shenzhen, famous not only for its huge amount of business and the large number of products manufactured “but also for a wave of suicides in 2010 (....): ‘Dying is the only way to prove we once lived’ wrote a blogger from the factory. The Wire, 4 June 2017, by T. Venkat, Srividya Tadepalli and Thomas Manuel.

Iron Moon is an expression that appears in the writings of Xu Lizhi and it has been used as the title for the anthology of poems and documentary directed by Xiaoyu Qin and Feiyue Wu in 2015 on these worker poets. In China and everywhere else, always: the songs of African slaves in America; the meditations of Robert Walser with his stories of life In the Office, the life of Bartleby by Melville, of Akaky Akakievich by Gogol.

Out of soulless work comes a strong need for language with energy, a desperate elevation of poetic intensity created by an urge to salvage oneself, as a stylised form of the survival instinct.

(including dance); the body enters into a process of seeking continuity with what is both sensed internally and perceived externally. (…) ‘Language,’ writes McGilchrist, ‘is a hybrid. It evolved from music and in this part of its history represented the urge to communicate (…). Its origins lie in the body and the world of experience. But referential language (…) did not originate in a drive to communicate … It has done everything it can to repudiate both its bodily origins and its dependency on experience – to become a world unto itself’ Rowan Williams (2014), The Edge of Words. Bloomsbury.
Roger Chartier (1995)³ says that the shift from monastic study to urban schools “changed everything”, even how we read, which no longer meant participating in the mystery of the Holy Word but decoding writing, meaning and doctrine.

To a certain extent, we could say there was a shift from the liturgy of experiencing the word to philology and decoding. This might even be described as a shift from “monks contemplating language” to “office-worker monks, copyists, the mechanics of language” (in the vein of Akakievich and Bartleby), as the founder of a new linguistic ideology and its successive forms. Or reductions: reducing languages or tongues into codes, conversations into information flow, literature per se into “stories”. One of the founding moments of the dominant Western linguistic ideology, a certain direction in the construction of knowledge.

A founding moment which Chartier pins down to a specific transition (the shift from monastery to urban schools) and which we can also position in history, albeit with the uncertainty typical of such cases. A process that developed and crystallised, at least, during the 12th century in Europe where, among many other factors and conflicts, the confrontation between Church and Empire resulted in the sacred being outsourced, to some extent, by setting up a structure of “spiritual administration”. A structure which, merely by existing, meant that believers’ inner feelings (experienced from their own perspective as an inherent divine dimension) would no longer be perceived as such in the same way.

A process of expropriation, at least in terms of human perception (and the resulting beliefs and attitudes) which has continued to develop, segmenting the human condition and breaking the ties with “the reality around us”, with which we instinctively relate with a desire for continuity. In the eloquent words of Gilbert Durand, the res sacra (the sacred) has ended up assimilating the res ecclesiastica (the ecclesiastic)⁴, administering what has been appropriated externally. A process that identifies what is inherent

or perceived as inherent to human beings, that segregates, classifies and
names this and then offers it up again, administering it from the outside, as
though it had never formed a part of us.

The Western way of socially perceiving art forms part of this process, ob-
scuring and, in a way, eliminating from the consciousness what might be
seen as a certain poetic instinct inherent in humans. And, from this per-
spective, there is also the phenomenon called “tongues” or languages. In
a similar way to what happens with art, we often end up perceiving lan-
guages as entities that are external to ourselves, turning them into objects
that can be managed, appropriated and expropriated. Consequently, in a
situation which seems to be both a movement and apparently a historical
simplification (and which may be useful to us provisionally), much of what
is sacred, poetic or communicative becomes administered “externally” to
the person in question, be it through ecclesiastical structures, artistic insti-
tutions, prescriptive grammars, dictionaries or language standardisation
plans.

In spite of the undeniably important contribution made by some of these
mechanisms, we should perhaps attempt to dishabituate ourselves from
them from time to time, as well as from the conceptual inertia that they
entail.

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A panorama that some authors do not hesitate to express in openly pessi-
mistic terms, such as George Steiner in Real Presences:

*Used (misused) as some kind of representational grid or facsimile of
‘the real’, language has indeed withered to inert routine and cliché.*

Language and tedium, then, from a rather Steineresque perspective. But,
at the same time, also, the survival of human manifestations where there
is a different perception and a different experience of language and com-
munication. Forms of communication *ethoi* where a highly charged expe-
rience of language and communication has clearly survived. Apart from
examples found in the art of language, this is also the case in spiritual
traditions. Very often these are the places where, if the religious practice
is genuine, we find a radical communicative instinct, albeit displayed in a
variety of ways.
For example, a communicative technology, such as prayer\(^5\), its conception and experience for those speaking as a way of relating to the divine that questions the boundaries between “the person” in co-creation with “the divine”, recalling God, reciprocally; in other words, also divine remembrance (the Sufi dhikr, the Lord’s Prayer in Orthodox Christianity and other kinds of mantra); traditions (for example, the Buddhist perspective) where language is not an abstraction but experienced by believers, in certain practices, as something with physical substance that comes into contact with the senses, or as an experience that takes language to its limits.

Consequently, spiritual traditions can be seen as conceptions and experiences of radical communication. A certain way of perceiving and experiencing language and its sensory counterparts; language and its other side, silence. A space that allows us to observe the lesser-known dimensions of linguistic diversity.

Because linguistic diversity not only includes the diversity of codes, what we call “tongues” or languages, but also a number of more or less explicit cultural representations of the intersection between language and human being.

Such cultural representations form the basis not only of the linguistic form and its use but also of a large part of the institutions through which we organise ourselves socially and, above all, basic notions such as those of person and community (Schieffelin et al. 1998\(^6\)).

Different societies have different conceptions of language/tongues. Such conceptions influence linguistic practice and the other cultural practices, including those resulting from spiritual traditions.

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\(^5\)  Alicia Fuentes-Calle (2009) “Pregària i diversitat lingüística”, in 27 Llengua i acollida, various authors.

and the religious practices that often arise from them form a relevant part of the city’s linguistic and communicative diversity.

The seminar provided a brief overview by means of three questions proposed to three extraordinary speakers, which can be found here in the publication of the articles presenting their talks.

- What do we discover about how we perceive and experience language when observed from the perspective of spiritual traditions? With Jordi Pigem.
- What do we discover about the history of religions when observed from the perspective of the languages that channelled them and helped them to spread? With Nicholas Ostler
- Within the context of globalised cities, what is the role played by young people’s religious ties in their relationship with languages and education? With Vally Lytra.

The seminar concluded with a round table made up of members of the religious communities of Barcelona. According to Édouard Glissant, the collective memory is a prophetic memory and it was with this in mind that we brought together different cultural viewpoints, all forming part of the contemporary culture of the city they share, as an index of different linguistic experiences in time and space.

Consequently, the round table attempted to look at features of the city’s linguistic diversity based on different experiences of language and the communicative *ethoi* implicit in the various spiritual traditions. The result was a relaxed, friendly exchange of views and opinions, presented by Mercè Solé, which covered a range of issues through personal experience and anecdotes:

- The importance of the spoken or oral word, the spiritual importance of the voice, the physiological component of the word and its vibration in the environment.
- Different linguistic uses, in the everyday and sacred register. The power of language and its counterpart, the necessary silence, language which should be avoided.
- Intergenerational differences in faith with regard to sacred texts, their interpretation, the importance of understanding and of speaking the words from the heart.
Different perspectives: prayer as speaking, talking, and prayer as listening.

How we explain, in different languages, the concepts of spiritual traditions, for example issues in translating from non-theist to theist traditions. How it can be communicated when this cannot be achieved through language.

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The best way in which language relates to the world is not when it represents it but when it creates it, perhaps because this is the original “ground rule” of language.

Spiritual traditions, insofar as “traditions of radical communication”, represent a privileged place to observe how humans relate to language, viewed from perspectives of its diversity that have been rarely explored.
“As there is, in the word, all the light and wonder of the world…”

Jordi Pigem

On the 15th of October 1903, at the Ateneu Barcelonès, the poet and philosopher Joan Maragall (1860-1911) gave the opening lecture for that academic year, entitled *Elogi de la paraula* (Eulogy for the word). In his talk, Maragall defined “the word” as “the most marvellous thing in this world because all the corporeal wonder and spiritual wonder of Nature is contained and brought together therein”. Over a hundred years later, the title I’ve chosen for this article comes from a phrase uttered by Maragall in that lecture; a phrase that sums up its main point:

As there is, in the word, all the light and wonder of the world, we should speak as if enchanted, as if dazzled

Maragall gives various examples of this, one being “Have you never listened to how lovers speak? They appear to be under a spell and don’t know what they’re saying. [...] That’s how poets speak, too. They’re the lovers of everything in the world and they also gaze intently and become overwhelmed with emotion before they speak.” Prophets and mystics are also rapturous when they speak, and the central words of any spiritual tradition sustain this enchantment, if only for those following the tradition in question. But Maragall tells us that all the light and all the mystery of the world is not only expressed in words such as *Om, Tao* or *God* but in the living, creative word as a whole.

This view of words and of speaking has not been very prevalent in the hundred years after Joan Maragall’s death. Many of our contemporaries, including several experts in linguistics, might wonder, from an instrumental view of language, ‘What mystery is there in words? Aren’t words just mere signs? Aren’t languages just systems to communicate?’ However, this instrumental view of language is difficult to defend after what we have learned from Saussure, Frege, Merleau-Ponty and many other authors who

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have reflected on the nature of language and words and the complexities of translating poetry.³

The human world is a linguistic world: our experience of the world is articulated by and through words. If, as proposed by some classical philosophers, the human condition is a bridge between what is animal and what is divine, or between ignorance and awakening (as suggested by Buddhism), this intermediate condition of humans is inseparable from the linguistic dimension. The linguistic dimension is deficient when the human condition is underdeveloped (as in the case of babies) or when it has been seriously affected (as in coma patients). On the other hand, the linguistic dimension appears to dissipate or fade into the background in spiritual experiences of silence or profound contemplation, or at times of intense creativity (in non-linguistic arts such as music or painting, although in these cases we somehow transcend the human condition).

Today’s foremost philosopher in the Anglo-Saxon world, Charles Taylor, has dedicated his most recent work (*The Language Animal, 2016*)⁴ to presenting the deficiencies of the instrumental view (or the “designative-instrumental” or “atomistic” view) of language deriving from Hobbes, Locke and Condillac, and to defending a “constitutive-expressive” or “holistic” view of language in which it is constitutive of human nature, existing before any knowledge of ourselves or the world (as shown by Gadamer) and comprehensible only as a whole and not as a mere sum of fragmented entities (as proposed by Humboldt). Maragall, however, goes even further: he speaks of light and wonder.

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We should clarify, however, that we are talking about the living, creative word, about words in the fullest possible sense, which Merleau-Ponty calls

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³ Highly recommended reading on the poetic tradition is Andrés Claro, *Las vasijas quebradas: Cuatro variaciones sobre ‘la tarea del traductor’,* Santiago de Chile: Universidad Diego Portales, 2012. If translating is to “trasladar”, i.e. to move something from one place to another, then what we are moving changes when it reaches the other location, the other side. If translating is to “transvasar”, i.e. to move a liquid from one container to another, for example from the reservoir of the Catalan language into the reservoir of the English language, then the liquid changes when it is moved from one container to another, clearly altering its taste and, in one way or another, its content.

parole parlante (speaking word) rather than parole parlée (spoken word), which is repetitive and lacking in creative drive.\(^5\) Or rather than our contemporary attachment to “data” as a supposed model of knowledge.

At the same time as the tendency for linguistic diversity to diminish, there is also a tendency for words themselves to become eroded. Perhaps, as pointed out by Emerson, all words were originally poetical words:

As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic.\(^6\)

When wisdom falls apart, knowledge remains (well-integrated knowledge is wisdom).

When knowledge falls apart, information remains (well-integrated information is knowledge).

When information falls apart, data remain (well-integrated data are information).

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One of the premises of modern science, explicit in the 17th century and generally implicit since then, is that only that which can be measured, quantified and, ultimately, reified and reduced to an object is truly real. Two of the greatest exponents of modern science, Descartes and Galileo,

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5 Merleau-Ponty, Phénoménologie de la perception, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, p. 229. “On pourrât distinguer une parole parlante et une parole parlée. La première est celle dans laquelle l’intention significative se trouve à l’état naissant. […] De là la parole parlée, qui jouit des significations disponibles comme d’une fortune acquise”. Earlier in the work (p. 214), Merleau-Ponty laments the loss of the enchantment and sparkle of words: “Nous vivons dans un monde où la parole est instituée. Pour toutes ces paroles banales, nous possédons en nous-mêmes des significations déjà formées. Elles ne suscitent en nous que des pensées secondes; celles-ci à leur tour se traduisent en d’autres paroles qui n’exigent de nous aucun véritable effort d’expression et ne demanderont à nos auditeurs aucun effort de compréhension. Ainsi le langage et la compréhension du langage paraissent aller de soi”.

stated that anything which cannot be measured (flavours, smells, colours, pleasure, pain, etc.) are not real things but “confused ideas” (Descartes) or “mere names” (Galileo). This has methodological advantages for natural sciences and technological efficiency but it undermines our immediate experience of the world and of language.

Our experience of being alive, our inwardness and the source of our beliefs and our horizons are all intangible. When we ignore the intangible, we ignore an essential part of what we are and what we do. First and foremost, what is potentially most interesting in our lives is intangible: the quality of our relationships, the path we wish to take or our innermost dreams cannot be reduced to facts and figures. And what is most interesting in languages and words is also intangible. There are things we can measure in the words ‘love’ and ‘freedom’: one has four letters and the other nine; one has twice as many consonants as vowels. But this tells us absolutely nothing about what the words love and freedom are saying. What is important about these words, where they lead us, their meaning, is intangible and unquantifiable. Naturally the more sophisticated aspects of language can be measured, by sociologists, sonologists and many others, and all this can be very useful, for sociological purposes for instance, but not in terms of the specific nature or deepest meaning of language and words.

In a world where we believe that only what is tangible and can be quantified and reified is truly real, the Word, insofar as it embodies a sense or meaning, makes the intangible apparent.

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In his book The Idea of History, the English historian and philosopher Robin George Collingwood called attention to the fact that a natural science approach cannot be properly applied to the study of history. Collingwood notes that historical facts have an objective dimension: what happened where and when. But the essence of truly historic facts cannot be separated from the perceptions, reflections and expectations of the human beings involved. In this respect, Collingwood talks about the outside of a

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7 Science cannot say anything about consciousness because consciousness isn’t tangible. And a science without consciousness can never provide us with true knowledge. As pointed out by the philosopher Michel Bitbol, today consciousness is the blind spot of science (see Jordi Pigem, Intel·ligència vital, Barcelona: Kairós, 2016, pp. 117-119 and 154.

8 I explore this in Àngels i robots, Barcelona: Viena, 2017.
historical event, its measurable exterior dimension, and the *inside* of the event, what the people involved experienced.

Joan Maragall speaking on that day in 1903 at the Ateneu Barcelonès to a group of VIPs from Barcelona and the world of culture, all dressed in the appropriate attire for the city and the time, could be seen as the exterior dimension of the event, while the interior dimension consists of what Maragall experienced as he pronounced his words and of what his listeners sensed (in both meanings of the word: in terms of what they heard but also what they felt) and what they understood.

Collingwood gives a more classical example. In order to see a fact as a historical event, such as Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon, we cannot focus solely on the exterior dimension (namely whether it was on such and such a day in January 49 AD, how many men were with him, what the temperature was, how fast the river was flowing) but rather must also contemplate its interior dimension: how Julius Caesar was challenging the authorities by carrying out this act or what he felt when he said (if he did) *alea jacta est*, the die is cast. But not only this. Collingwood says that what history does is to *re-enact* the historical event; not imagine it but return it to the present. To the extent that, claims Collingwood, when a historian truly understands what Julius Caesar was thinking, the thought of the historian and that of Julius Caesar are “not two thoughts but one and the same thought”.

Returning to our example, if we truly understand what Joan Maragall meant when he said that there is all the light and wonder of the world in the word, all the corporeal wonder and spiritual wonder of nature, then our understanding is one and the same as Maragall’s; we don’t have two identical thoughts, his and ours, but rather share the same thought.

All this goes against the assumptions of the modern world in which spirituality is little more than an addition, a thin veneer on the materialistic view that impregnates and afflicts our world today. This view makes us believe that our minds contain thoughts in a similar way to a packet containing biscuits and that two thoughts can coincide in their form and content just as two biscuits can be identical in their form and content. But the natural conclusion to what we are saying forces us to abandon these spatial metaphors that reify language and cancel out its core, its heart and its mystery. Because all genuine language is spiritual *per se*. Or, returning to the words

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of Maragall, it holds all the mystery and all the light of the world, all the corporeal wonder and all the spiritual wonder.

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While we read, we breathe. Breathing is essential but very often goes unnoticed. And the same thing happens with spirituality. In Latin, *spiritus* meant respiration, breath, air, breeze and spirit all at once. In classical Greek, *pneuma* meant respiration, air (we still say ‘pneumatic’), wind and spirit. The Gospel according to Saint John, albeit written in late Greek from the end of the Hellenistic period, still uses a single word, *pneuma*, to refer in the same paragraph to both the spirit and the wind: "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. […] The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3, 6-8). In modern languages, to ensure the text makes sense, we have to translate *pneuma* first as ‘spirit’ (often adding a capital letter which isn’t in the original Greek), afterwards as ‘wind’ and then again as ‘spirit’. But at the time it was written, experiences of the spirit and of the wind were not as different as they may appear today, as Owen Barfield eloquently explains.10 For us, using modern languages, most of these meanings refer to tangible things (respiration, breath, breeze) while we see the spirit as intangible. But more ancient or primitive languages had yet to separate the tangible and the intangible, the material and the immaterial.

One indication of this coincidence of meaning remains in the word ‘heart’, which can be used to refer both to the physical organ studied by cardiologists and to a spirit of intangible qualities (a “good-hearted” person, something we say “whole-heartedly”).11

The further back we go in time, the less separation we find between what is tangible and intangible: in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* there are no rigid boundaries between humans, gods and nature. This is not due to any random polysemy nor is it a metaphor (a metaphor links two pre-existing meanings). People’s experiences of reality were not yet compartmentalised into the sacred and the profane. We have been the ones to fragment the world.

One of the mysteries of language is the spontaneity with which it flows through us. When we learn a new language, we must make an effort to consciously remember certain details of the vocabulary or grammar. But when we speak a language fluently we don’t need to pay attention to any of that: speaking flows through us and we care as little about the vocabulary and the grammar as we do about the mechanics and angles of our steps as we stroll in a quiet, peaceful setting.

Humboldt expresses his surprise at the fact that each word is infallibly present in speech at the precise moment it is required, an extraordinary feat that is beyond the scope of any human memory conceived in terms of reductionist materialism. In effect, an adult has, at their disposition, a repertoire of many thousands of words (hundreds of thousands in the case of many polyglots) which appear effortlessly and immediately (the fact that, sometimes, we have to make an effort to remember a word is the exception that proves the rule; speech almost always flows naturally and effortlessly).

But this fluidity per se is even more extraordinary: the fact that words come to us just as we need them. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes:

That is, that the things have us, and that it is not we who have the things. […] That language has us and that it is not we who have language. That it is being that speaks within us and not we who speak of being.

Perhaps Heidegger’s expression is more familiar:

In its essence, language is neither expression nor an activity of man. Language speaks.

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13 Merleau-Ponty, Le visible et l’invisible, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p. 247 (note 20 May 1959). «Il faut faire comprendre […] que les choses nous ont et que ce n’est pas nous qui avons les choses. […] Que le langage nous a et que ce n’est pas nous qui avons le langage. Que c’est l’être qui parle en nous et non nous qui parlons de l’être.»
Such is the experience of poets or inspired orators. In the two founding poems of the West, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the opening lines invoke the force which, over the thousands and thousands of verses that follow, will sing through the bard. The *Iliad* begins “Sing, goddess, the anger […]

(μὴν ἔειδε θεὰ);” while the *Odyssey* starts with “Tell me, Muse, of the man […]” (ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα). In one case the force from which the story emanates is the goddess (θεὰ) while in the other it is the muse (μοῦσα); the poet is merely an instrument or interpreter. Perhaps, to some extent, as suggested by Merleau-Ponty, the world speaks through us:

And in a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests.  

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Inspiration, as an in-corporation of the *spiritus*, suggests receiving the creative air of the spirit, breathing creativity deeply in and then, afterwards, breathing or blowing out, manifesting it outwardly.

As pointed out by the sinologist Stephen Owen, when commenting on a traditional Chinese view of creative writing [wen, 文]:

“The true function of literature [wen] is to be the means by which all inherent order may come through. [...] Literature is a gate for the latent and inarticulate to become manifest. The poem is not simply the manifest state of the world’s inherent order; its movement is the process of that order becoming manifest.”

One of the most inspired demonstrations of this idea in western literature can be found in the comedy *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when Theseus says (in an ironic context that is refuted by the situation as a whole):

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15 *Iliad*, Translated by Richmond Lattimore (1951)  
16 *Odyssey*, Translated by Richmond Lattimore (1965)  
The poet’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven.
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.19

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In his first speech as a linguist at the Berlin Academy in 1820, Wilhelm von Humboldt made the famous statement that “The diversity of languages is not a diversity of sounds and signs but a diversity of the views of the world”.20 One century earlier, linguistic diversity had already been celebrated by Leibniz (who used to write in seven languages) as “la merveilleuse variété des opérations de notre esprit”.21 Humboldt actually wanted the diversity of languages to increase:

[…] since the spirit that manifests itself in the world cannot be known exhaustively by any given set of views, but since each language always discovers something new, it would be good if it were possible to multiply the different languages as much as the number of inhabitants of the earth would allow.22

But where does this diversity come from? Nowadays, linguists such as Mario Alinei claim that contemporary linguistic diversity dates back much

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19 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act V, Scene 1.
further than originally thought.\textsuperscript{23} Humboldt notes that, the older languages are, the more their grammar tends to be not simpler but in fact richer and more complex.\textsuperscript{24} And Whorf, in a wonderful passage from \textit{Language, Thought and Reality}, expresses thus one of the mysteries inherent in language:

\begin{quote}
A fair realization of the incredible degree of the diversity of linguistic system that ranges over the globe leaves one with an inescapable feeling that the human spirit is inconceivably old; that the few thousand years of history covered by our written records are no more than the thickness of a pencil mark on the scale that measures our past experience on this planet; that the events of these recent millennia spell nothing in any evolutionary wise, that the race has taken no sudden spurt, achieved no commanding synthesis during recent millennia, but has only played a little with a few of the linguistic formulations and views of nature bequeathed from an inexpressibly longer past.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

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Another mystery is the connection between the idea and the word. Maragall marvelled at the fact that, when speaking, the lips “move, air vibrates with a subtle variety and this material vibration, materially perceived by the senses, carries within it this immaterial thing that reveals the spirit: the idea!”\textsuperscript{26} How do we manage to bridge the gap between the material and immaterial?

Merleau-Ponty, writing about “the mystery of language”, also admires how words bring us to their meaning and how, as we pay attention to the meaning, we forget the words themselves. For the French philosopher, it is


\textsuperscript{24} Wilhelm von Humboldt, \textit{Gesammelte Schriften}, vol. 7 (Kawi-Einleitung), Berlin: Behr: 1836, p. 169-170.


\textsuperscript{26} Maragall, Op. cit. pp. 33-34.
a mystery how language, “through a kind of overflowing”, takes us beyond itself and opens up a meaning to us.\textsuperscript{27}

Humboldt also mentioned the “inscrutable” (unerforschliches) nature of the link between sound and its meaning:

No matter how much one may break down concepts and dismember words, one cannot resolve the mystery of how the idea actually connects with the word.\textsuperscript{28}

People do not understand one another by effectively exchanging signs for things, nor by mutually deciding to produce exactly and completely the same concept, but rather they understand each other because each one touches or plays, in the other, the same link in the chain of their sensory conception and interior productions of concepts, each one playing the same string on their spiritual instrument, whereupon corresponding but not identical concepts emerge in all those concerned.

[...] When the link in the chain or the string on the instrument is played in this way, the whole vibrates, and the concept that emerges is in harmony with everything surrounding that individual link, even to the furthest distance.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{27} Merleau-Ponty, “L’algorithme et le mystère du langage
to La prose du monde, Paris: Gallimard, 1969, p. 162: “Le mystère est que, dans le moment même où le langage est ainsi obsédé de lui-même, il lui est donné, comme par surcroît, de nous ouvrir à une signification”.

\textsuperscript{28} “Man kann Begriffe spalten, Wörter zergliedern, so weit man es vermag, und man tritt darum der Geheimnis nicht näher, wie eigentlich der Gedanke sich mit dem Worte verbündet”. Wilhelm von Humboldt, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 7 (Kawi-Einleitung), Berlin: Behr: 1836, p. 171.

\textsuperscript{29} “Die Menschen verstehen einander nicht dadurch, dass sie sich Zeichen der Dinge wirklich hingeben, auch nicht dadurch, dass sie sich gegenseitig bestimmen, genau und vollständig denselben Begriff hervorbringen, sondern dadurch, dass sie gegenseitig in einander dasselbe Glied der Kette ihrer sinnlichen Vorstellungen und inneren Begriffserzeugungen berühren, dieselbe Taste ihres geistigen Instruments anschlagen, worauf alsdann in jedem entsprechende, nicht aber dieselben Begriffe hervorspringen. [...] Wird nun aber auf diese Weise das Glied der Kette, die Taste des Instrumentes berührt, so erzittert das Ganze, und was, als Begriff aus der Seele hervorspringt, steht in Einklang mit allem, was das einzelne Glied bis auf die weiteste Entfernung umgibt.” Wilhelm von Humboldt, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 7 (Kawi-Einleitung), Berlin: Behr: 1836, pp. 169-170. Ernst Cassirer applies this view of how people understand in Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis (Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, vol. 3), Hamburg: Meiner, 2010, p. 256.
A few years after Maragall’s death, the sociologist Max Weber talked about the “disenchantment of the world” as an essential feature of the past few centuries: *Entzauberung der Welt*, in other words a decline in the sense of enchantment or magic (*Zauber*) which had accompanied our ancestors’ experience of the world. For many of us, or our peers, the enchantment of the world has faded, and so too the enchantment of words and speech. If there is a connection between the disenchantment of the world and the disenchantment of words, then there is also a connection between the revitalisation of words and languages and the revitalisation of the world.
Missionary Faiths Evolve, as they Expand into New Languages

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Introduction

In my book *Passwords to Paradise* (2015) I attempted to describe the effects of the use of new languages on religions as they were deliberately propagated round the world. Since missionary faiths – the only ones which are given this propagation – are claimed to be universal, whereas humanity is inevitably divided into speech-groups that communicate in a host of different languages, those religions, if they are to be more widely accepted and understood, must be put across in new languages. What does this do to the religions which are so converted linguistically?

To examine the influence of a new language on the propagation of a faith, we need a way of pinning down the different aspects of a language as it impinges on religious faith, and talking about them separately. This classification is essential to making sense of developments, in missionary situations all over the world. There are five that must be considered.

1. Each language—whether of preacher, or of convert—had a *vocabulary*, a set of words, some of them having a technical sense in the religion that might have no equivalent among the converts’ language. This is what needed to be directly translated in the context of a conversion.

2. There are the relational elements of languages—which may be jointly called “grammar.” Usually, these elements map invisibly from the original language to that of converts; but occasionally there are grammatical incompatibilities, where—at a highly abstract level—there seems to be a mismatch between the categories of the old and new systems. This can be a subtle obstacle to translation.

3. Since missionary faiths are universally associated with literacy, the receiving languages all had—or they gained—a written form, which was used to create some form of (accessible) *scripture*.

4. All languages of converts had a background in old liturgy, and possibly in stated creeds, as they had been before conversion to the new faith. This might be no more than a special phraseology for “deep” ideas; but
it might also include reference to spiritual beings and places, which could be carried over somehow as what might be called heirlooms in the new faith.

5. Finally, every language gives a sense of solidarity to its speakers. Using the language is the audible and visible token of a language community, and in the context of a conversion, this community will need to be reconciled with, and at best integrated into, the community of those faithful to the religion.

These different aspects create a conceptual landscape, the places where use of the new language can create a divergence in the content of the new faith, as it might be embraced by people with perhaps unperceived conceptual baggage from their prior languages.

1. Vocabulary for new concepts

It is a classic thesis of translation theory that a translator has just three options, when faced with a word where there is no exact equivalence between the source and the target language.1 The word can simply be borrowed into the new language: this has the advantage of exactness, but the disadvantage that the words may be totally opaque to the target audience. The word can be translated with a calque, i.e. a loan translation that explains its meaning, but may seem clumsy and unidiomatic to the audience. Or the word may be replaced with the closest apparent synonym, a “loan-meaning”: the result is apparent sense, but the particular sense of the original word is left vague, and the translator can only hope that the context, and further discussion, will make the new sense clearer. If it does not, then the old senses of the word may come to color the concept, and some part of the religion will be affected.

Consider, for example, the concept of “blessing.” This idea, expressed in Hebrew by bārak (which seems originally to have meant “bend the knee”), was expressed in Greek as a loan-meaning eulogia (“well-speaking”), which classically had meant “praise.” This was taken up into Latin as a loan translation, benedictiō (also “well-speaking”). However, its sense was also conveyed by an unexpected synonym (i.e., a loan-meaning), signātiō (“signing”): this word was chosen because, concretely, to achieve the effect of blessing one made the sign of the cross.
Across northern Europe, this idea was then conveyed by all the possible routes. In Germany, a borrowing of one of the Latin words, signāre (in its verbal form) was turned into German segnen, whereas in the British Isles the other Latin word, benedictio, was chosen for borrowing, becoming Welsh bendithion, Gaelic beannacht. In English, a loan-meaning blédsian (an old term associated with sacrifice, originally meaning “to spatter with blood”) was pressed into service, because it had become associated with bliss (the abstract-noun from blithe) and hence seemed to mean “to make happy.” Meanwhile in the east, the loan-translation approach was adopted (either from Latin or from Greek) giving Slavonic blago-slovenie (“well-speaking” again).

Arguably, all of them have come to have the same meaning—e.g., as in Genesis 2:3 “And God blessed the seventh day.” But it is clear that many routes have been followed, each with a trail of different nuances. In the event, they all found their way to the same semantic goal. But each could have involved a wrong turn.

More crucially, let us consider a single example, of how the central mystery of Christ’s status as (Greek) lógos when, in North Africa, the faith was first put across in the vernacular Latin. Tertullian, who lived in Carthage, in the fourth or fifth generation of Christians (160 to ca. 220), wrote eloquently in Latin. Apparently he was the first Christian to do so, but this new language was already causing some doctrinal difficulties. In practice, in Latin, one needed to choose among three potential translation-equivalents of lógos, each translating a different aspect of its meaning in Greek.

In Tertullian’s Latin, the lógos is translated as the sermo, “discourse.” This emphasizes the coherence of thought and understanding that lógos might be intended to convey. However it focuses on the social, conversational side of language (Latin itself, for example, is often called sermo Latinus) rather than on the rational, explanatory side—namely to give an account.

Arguably, a closer equivalent in Latin for lógos considered as a principle of the universe, (as both Heraclitus the pre-Socratic philosopher, and Saint John, meant it) would have been ratio “principle, plan” but also “proportion”. Tertullian tends to agree, as a matter of logic, but it seems that sermo had already established itself in Christian Latin:

God had the ratio which he had in him, his own, that is. For God is rational, and ratio is in him first, and then from him comes everyt-
hing; this *ratio* is his very understanding. This is what the Greeks call *lógos*, which we call *sermo*: and therefore our people are in the habit of saying for simplicity of interpretation that *sermo* was primordially with God, when it is more appropriate to say that *ratio* was held prior in time, because God was sermonic from the beginning but rational even before the beginning, and because *sermo* too, consisting of *ratio*, shows *ratio* to have priority as *sermo*’s substance.²

The other surviving great Christian writer of Tertullian’s era, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (ca. 200 to 258), did indeed use *sermo* as the equivalent of *lógos*.³ However, Cyprian’s great contemporary and opponent, Novatian (who was a Roman rather than a North African bishop), used both *sermo* and *verbum*. It is hard to claim that *verbum* is a better translation, meaning as it does a single “word” or “verb” (Greek *léxis* or *rhēma*); but it did seem to have the virtue of minimality. Why would God waste words in verbiage? And furthermore Christ was clearly his only-begotten son, better represented by a single word.⁴ *Verbum* thereafter dominated in the literature until Augustine (354–430), who noted that there are two traditions for translating *lógos*, and in fact used both. Then, without further ado—or explanation—Jerome, writing in about 382-390, canonized *verbum* in the Vulgate, to be officially accepted thereafter. One might summarize: *verbum sapienti* “a word to the wise,” and end of story.

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At the same time (ca 2nd century AD), but at other end of the Eurasian landmass, a comparable dispute was sowing confusion in the faith of the Buddha. The Buddha had characterized it as *maggo* (Sanskrit *mārgaḥ*), “a road”; but now it was seen as a *yānam*, “a conveyance.”

It has recently been suggested that this may have been due to faulty understanding of an Indic language by Chinese translators: the Great Knowledge (*mahājñānam*—Gandhari *mahañana*) being misheard as the Great Cart (*mahāyānam*—Gandhari *mahayana*). The words could easily have been confused by poor scholars; and simple converts were primed to make this mistake, since the Lotus Sutra,⁵ many people’s main access to Buddhism, contains a memorable parable for the difficulty of preaching, where a loving father (the Buddha) has to entice his children out of a burning house by promising them rides on special carts, but then delivers them a carriage better than they could ever have hoped for.⁶
This meant that Buddhism came more and more to be seen as something that, if accepted, would carry one, rather than a direction to be taken exclusively through personal effort. It became usual to distinguish this new (and self-acclaimed) mahā-yānam (“Great Vehicle”) from the classic doctrine, from the śrāvaka-yānam (“the disciples’ vehicle”). Soon the innovators were deriding the old way as hīna-yānam, where the prefix (the past participle of hā “to desert”) is definitely derogatory: not so much a “lesser vehicle” as an “abandoned, failed, clapped out, vehicle.” As the Lotus Sutra itself puts it rather combatively, in chapter 15:

\[
\text{ekam hi yānam dvitiyam na vidyate: tṛtīyam naivāsti kadāci loke}
\]

there is but one vehicle; a second is not known; neither is there a third anywhere in the world.

2. Grammar

A good and wide-ranging example of very different grammatical systems pressed into service to express a missionary faith is that of the American languages in the service of the Church. This happened throughout Latin America. How did the Gospels fare, as expressed in such languages?

We can only give one salient instance, that of the closely-related Tupí and Guaraní in Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay: and the answer is that although there was considerable potential to apply alien grammar to clarify some knotty points in Christian theology, it remained unfulfilled: since native speakers of these languages were in effect barred from entering the priesthood, ultimately not enough use was made of the languages to develop the faith in their own terms.

There had been some initial scepticism, at the highest level, about American languages’ expressive power. In 1596, even as the Jesuits were setting up reducciones for Guaraní-speakers, the Spanish King was decreeing for Río de la Plata that only Spanish should be used, on the ground that indigenous languages “would not allow the expression of the mysteries of the faith with propriety and without imperfections.” And part of the reason that Chibcha had been unable to gather momentum as a lingua general in the latter sixteenth century had been opposition by superiors
of the Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians to use of the language, who asserted,

... these dialects [are] extremely poor in vocabulary, lacking such terms as Christ, charity, grace, contrition, penitence etc. [and] they possess indecent expressions for terms such as incarnation and virginity.\(^8\)

Although they are fairly typical of the uninstructed views which tend to prevail before much research has been done on little known languages, these dismissive or patronizing attititudes were not shared by Europeans who had any direct linguistic knowledge. Fr Rodrigo de la Cruz, in a letter to the Spanish emperor Charles V in 1550, wrote of Nahuatl, the Mexican language, “that in every village today there are many Indians who know it and learn it easily, and a very great number who confess in that language. It is an extremely elegant language, as elegant as any in the world.”

Another priest, Francisco Ximénez (1666-1730) described the Mayan language K’iche’: “What I say is that, having penetrated these languages, of all those I have knowledge, among Latin, our Castilian, German, Italian etc., there is no language more proper, nor more genuine, nor more ordered, nor regular…”\(^9\)

Fr Ximénez wrote of the rationality of K’iche’ thus: “[the words] are like natural signs with such order and correspondence that I do not find any other language more ordered or even as much so, so that I have come to believe that this language is the first in the world.”\(^10\)

An example of such signs would be the tense markers for nouns that the Portuguese and Spanish linguists discovered in Tupi and Guaraní.\(^11\)

Tupi and Guaraní are interesting in that no routine distinction is made between present and past in verbs; nouns, however, may be marked for past and future. In Tupi the past ending was –pwer, and the future –rama. Guaraní, as usual presents somewhat eroded equivalent forms: respectively –kwer or –kwe, and ram or râ. They make a noun refer to a former state, now ended, and to a state intended or foreseen, which is not yet achieved at the time of the utterance. Interestingly they can co-occur on the same noun, usually in the order future+past, hence Tupi -rambwera and Guara-
ni –rangwe. This is what Guasch calls the “frustrated future”, indicating an unfulfilled state that might or should have been.

To summarize in clear set of examples taken from Tupi 12

\[
\begin{align*}
Ayapó xe-rembi’u-rama & \quad \text{I am preparing my food} \\
& \quad \text{(which is not yet ready).} \\
Ayapó xe-rembi’u-pwera & \quad \text{I prepared my food} \\
& \quad \text{(which I have already eaten).} \\
Kunumí o’u xe-rembi’u-rambwera & \quad \text{The child ate my food} \\
& \quad \text{(which I never got).}
\end{align*}
\]

According to one grammarian, Montoya (1640, p. 30), it is also possible to combine them in the opposite order, to yield Guaraní –kwerã, characterizing something which “turned out”, i.e. might not or should not have happened, but nevertheless did.

These markers can, it turns out, also be used as independent words, much as English can talk of has-been’s, might-have-been’s, yet-to-be’s and never-was’s. As such they were used to give a more philosophical exact, and less figurative, translation in Tupi of Christ’s famous words in the Garden of Gethsemane. “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt… O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.” 13

In Tupi there are no cups to be drained. Jesus instead says: 14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T’i</th>
<th>ram-bûer</th>
<th>iã</th>
<th>xe-remimborarã-rama</th>
<th>xe rub-y gûé!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May-be</td>
<td>FUT-PAST</td>
<td>this</td>
<td>my-suffering-FUT</td>
<td>my Father O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

May these my future sufferings be an unfulfilled future, O My Father.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aipó</th>
<th>xe re’õnama</th>
<th>rambûera</th>
<th>abai-me,</th>
<th>t’o-nhe-monhang</th>
<th>umé</th>
<th>xe-remimotara.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This</td>
<td>I my-death</td>
<td>FUT-PAST</td>
<td>difficult-as</td>
<td>may it-PAS-SIVE-do</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>my-will</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As my death is difficult to make unfulfilled, may my will not be done.

It would be interesting to know whether Fr Montoya’s favourite examples in his grammar and dictionary of Guaraní, aba-cue-rã [man+PAST+FUT] “he who was not to have been a man and then was”, and omano-bae-ran-gue
[dead+thing+FUT+PAST] “he who was to die, but did not”\(^\text{15}\) are intended as contributions to Christology; they likely are.

Tupi and Guaraní might have been elegant vehicles for theology, had their speakers ever been admitted into the ordained, and hence influential, body of the Church as a whole. But as it was, use of American languages within the Church remained a means of pedagogy only, without implications for understanding of the faith as a whole.

These languages were used primarily for instruction in the Doctrina (hence requiring accurate translations of all the Christian terminology). They would also be used for ancillary purposes, which might develop people’s personal faith and understanding of Christian history, such as the writing of hymns and prayers, or for the performance of religious drama.

### 3. Scripture

The Buddha explicitly forbade the presentation of his teaching in Sanskrit:

\[
anujānāmi bhikkhave sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanāṃ pariyāpuni-tuṃ.\]

I require, monks, mastery of the enlightened word in one’s own expression:\(^\text{16}\)

Whose own (sakāya) interpretation he meant has remained a matter of dispute, but it was clearly not to be in metrical Sanskrit, then known as chan-
das. His insistence may have arisen because that form was then primarily associated with canonical Brahmanical religion.

Nonetheless, in the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism, scriptures written in Sanskrit did get established. The Prajñā-paramitā (Perfection of Wisdom) sutra, one of the earliest and most authoritative sutras, sets up its own written words for worship, and, in images, is constantly depicted as a volume embraced by Manjusri, Tara and other goddesses who represent the knowledge it imparts. In a typically flowery passage, the Lotus sutra sings its own praises as a physical book:

\[
\text{should there be one who receives and upholds, reads and recites, explains and teaches, or copies out The [Lotus] Sutra, be it even a}\]
single verse, looking upon the Sutra text with reverence as he would the Buddha himself, making various kinds of offerings of flowers, incense, beads, powdered incense, paste incense, burning incense, silk canopies, banners, clothing and music, or who even join his palms in reverence, O Medicine King, you should know that such a person has in the past already made offerings to tens of myriads of millions of Buddhas, in the presence of those Buddhas, accomplishing great vows…

This tradition of Buddhism, then, radically reformed its conception of buddha-vacana (i.e. the Buddhist scriptures) from a memorized record of the Buddha’s own words to the written volumes where these words (and extended versions of them) were inscribed.

Nor did the reverence of specific texts serve to freeze the content of the faith. A whole new tradition of what was known as abhidharma “out-and-out dharma” was developed, with a capacious new metaphysics. Although Gautama had famously registered a firm “no-comment” on matters of speculative theology (*mayā avyākatam* in Pali, literally, “by me undeclared”),¹ there was room for at least three classes of apparently divine – or lokuttara “world-transcending” – beings: in increasing rank, the deva, (or traditional deity), the bodhisattva (a superior being who was dedicated beyond the cycle of births to work for mankind’s enlightenment, and the buddha (already in a state of enlightenment, but still providing refuge in a buddha-kṣetra heaven for some imperfect beings).

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As Christianity was spread around the world, different missions turned out to take rather different attitudes to how much of the Christian scriptures needed to be reproduced in the new converts’ languages.

The basic text was known as the Bible (originally in Greek *biblia*, a neuter plural noun, meaning “books”). It was an extension of the Hebrew scrip-

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¹ E.g. “Therefore Malunkhyaputta, hold the undeclared as undeclared. Malunkhyaputta, what are the not-declared? The world is eternal, is not declared by me. The world is not eternal, is limited, is not declared. The soul and body are the same; the soul is different from the body; the Thus-Gone One is, after death; the Thus-Gone One is not after death; the Thus-Gone One is and is not after death; the Thus-Gone One neither is, nor is not after death: all are not declared by me.” *Majjhima Nikāya II. 2. 3* (63) Advice to Venerable Malunkhyaputta. (By “the Thus-Gone One” the Buddha is of course referring to himself.)
tures (TaNaKH an acronym for “Torah, Prophets, Writings”), which in practice were almost always consulted by Christians in the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. To this were added four Christian gospels, some early Church history (“Acts of the Apostles”), some correspondence of very early church fathers, notably Paul (“Epistles”) and an apocalyptic vision of the end times (“Revelation”). The originals of all these appear to have been in Greek, but all became available in Latin translation, first fragmentarily (as the “Vetus Latina”, and in a full translation (from the Hebrew and Greek originals) commissioned with Papal authority, and delivered by Jerome in the early 5th century. This was in principle open to all Christians who could read it.

But in practice it was not always equally accessible, even in propagating religions which claimed to offer a love of God available to all on equal terms. For example, in the propagation of the Christian faith to the Slavs, the decision to put the church service into vernacular Slavic, apparently egalitarian though it was, undercut the motive to translate Scripture as a whole. Hence the Bible did not become available in Old Church Slavonic at the time of the first conversions of the Slavs (latter 9th century), and indeed was not translated into Russian, the principal language of Slavic Christians, for 1000 years: the first full Orthodox Church Bible appeared in 1876, although the New Testament had been translated in 1822.

In some circumstances – notably those of the arrival of European colonists in the Americas – subject populations were not only denied equality, but even any promise or prospect of it. This was mitigated, in theory at least, by the duty placed on Europeans – in the Catholic empires of Spain and Portugal – to bring the conquered peoples to Christian salvation. But this was a curiously one-sided deal, from an ethical point of view. The Iberian colonists had an obligation to preach (often rather scantily fulfilled). But the colonized had no option to reject the preaching, on any terms at all.

This one-sidedness may be one of the reasons why the kind of written materials offered to the converts by the Spanish and Portuguese were not the Scriptures that were available to the preachers, namely the Holy Bible

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2 The evangelism of imported slaves was not a similar obligation of the Spanish and Portuguese states in their colonies. It might have been thought a natural implication of Christianity itself, but until the nineteenth century they were largely considered to have status of infidel Moors, of long standing in the Middle Ages, who had no right or obligation to receive Christian enlightenment.
itself. Instead, “Indians” were presented with *Doctrina* by Spanish and Portuguese in the form of special books, essentially beginners’ guides written to explain the faith to new converts. These pedagogical works, written in widely used American vernaculars, did at least contain the minimum “passwords” required for personal salvation – as judged by the Church in the Spanish and Portuguese empires. But they were not sufficient to lay down a foundation on which to build an indigenous priesthood.

And yet these cut-down primers remained the only religious manuals which would be translated into the local vernaculars. Indian converts were not allowed even the full texts of the Gospels, let alone the rest of the New Testament, or the Old Testament. Arguably, this was not a tactic deliberately and specifically to keep the American Indians subordinate: after all, within Catholic Christendom before the 18th century, only those educated in Latin – and in receipt of the full Church guidance on how to interpret it – were supposed to have access to the full majesty of the Biblical text. But it played easily into the hands of the European supremacists, sadly both in the laity and the Church, who wanted to keep Indians (including *mestizos*) in their place. The indigenous population were never allowed to join the clergy until well after the abolition of the empires.

A final threat to Scripture, even long after the original conversion, is the possibility that the form in which it is traditionally accepted (itself a translation) may be judged wanting by new generations seeking to deepen their faith. This is what happened to the Latin Bible, known as the Vulgate, when, standards of scholarship began to rise in the western Europe of the Reformation, so that a higher source of authority (Hebrew and Greek texts) came to replace it as a criterion for Christian truth. This was, paradoxically, rolled up with a movement to allow greater Scriptural access to the public at large, who naturally needed a fresh generation of translations into the vernacular. Thus, was the Vulgate simultaneously condemned as both too elitist (for the congregation) and not elite enough (for serious scholars).

4. Heirlooms

It is widely believed that many Buddhist bodhisattvas – in Mahayana theology, potential Buddhas who are waiting compassionately for the rest of the world to catch up – are, by origin, pagan deities of Greece, Persia or India in disguise, once upon a time re-dressed in order to reconcile simple
converts by allowing them to hang on to their old protectors. Likewise, the ranks of the Christian saints – who may intercede for mere mortals through their special status in heaven after death – are swelled by pre-Christian demigods of the Mediterranean and Europe, and latterly even of the Americas. (The female figures Gwan-yin and the Virgin Mary are often seen as particularly liable to this kind of latter-day re-casting.)

If these parts of the old linguistic world persist – imaginary characters which the newly converted do not want to lose – they will inevitably add something to the priorities of the faith that takes them in. Avalokiteśvara had been a particularly compassionate guardian spirit, but a male, as were all the original characters in the Buddhist story (except for the Buddha’s mother Mayā and wife Yaśodharā). When he was identified with Gwan-yin, his perceived sex changed, and with it the general presumptions about what it took to be a bodhisattva.

Likewise, when the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe was recognized as a patron saint in Mexico, the Virgin gained new attributes: most immediately her name Guadalupe (originally the Arabic name of a valley in Spain) was re-analyzed to make sense in Nahuatl: coatla-xopeuh “serpent crusher”. This same personage had – at earlier points in her career – attracted the Greek name theótokos “God-bearer” familiar from the cult of the goddess Isis (thus revolutionizing Christology in the Near East); and had been attended in childbirth by the Irish saint and ex-goddess St Brigid. (This was perhaps because of her skill with domestic animals, who were present in the stable.) In gratitude for this, Mary had awarded Brigid a saint’s day immediately before her own.

Saint Thomas was a historical figure who, we believe, spread the Christian faith quite literally into Central Asia and South India, dying many thousand miles away from Palestine. But he is also identified with a Tupí cultural hero Sumé, who is supposed to have brought the arts of civilization to Brazil. In Heliand, the Saxon re-telling of the gospels, he is represented as a warlike disciple, who called on his comrade apostles to follow Christ loyally into battle. New Christians need their links with proud moments in their past.

These characters stand out as linking the spiritual comfort that was available to people before and after their conversion to the new globalized missionary religion. Less vivid carry-overs can also be found, such as the
repertoire of Saints’ Days in the Catholic Church which partly reproduced the festivals of Ancient Rome.

And most naturally of all, adopting a new faith may not involve giving up on the phrases in the language which describe heroism. As an example of this, we can isolate phrases in the Mayan creed written in K’iche’, describing the passion of Christ, which have a direct resonance in poetry that had recounted the adventures of the Mayan cultural heroes who – like Christ – cheated the Lords of Death of their prey.

So, we have in the K’iche’ Doctrina (spelling modernized, and with a literal gloss)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>uchí Poncio Pilato</th>
<th>suffered under Poncius Pilate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>x-q’aq’obik x-ripik chu-wach Cruz</td>
<td>was-nailed <strong>was-spread</strong> on-face Cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xa’amik</td>
<td>died</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xmuq’k‘iq’</td>
<td>was buried</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>xq’ah chi xibalba</strong></td>
<td>descended to Hell (lit. place-of-fear)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rox q’k‘ih x-uq’aztah rib</td>
<td>3rd day <strong>was-revived</strong> for-himself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chik’ixol e q’aminaq’</td>
<td>from-among the dead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>x-aq’am chi q’ah…</strong></td>
<td>ascended to sky</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

while correspondingly in the Popol Vuh, we find

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ta xkik’ulawachij kiwach</th>
<th>Then they faced each other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xkirip kiq’ab’ kikabichal</td>
<td>both of them <strong>spread</strong> their arms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E pu jupujuj ta xebeq pa choj…</td>
<td>and head first they went into the pit oven…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Xeqaj chi xibalba</strong>…</td>
<td>They <strong>descended</strong> to Hell (lit. place-of-fear) …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nabe chikikamisaj kib</td>
<td>First they would kill themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xa wi xere lib’aj chik’astaj wi chi u-wach…</td>
<td>then immediately they would <strong>revive</strong> in their face…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ju suk’u <strong>xq’an chi kaj.</strong></td>
<td>Then at once they <strong>ascended</strong> into the sky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun k’u q’ij</td>
<td>One of them is sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun nay pu ik’chike.</td>
<td>and the other one is moon. 18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just as Jesus was crucified (in a spread-eagled position), then descended into Hell, then rose again, and finally ascended into Heaven, so the Twins fell to their deaths in a spread-eagled position, descended into Xibalba, were then revived (as fish faces), and rose up to the sky (where they became the sun and the moon).

All these retained heirlooms serve to colour the new faith with details from the old, comforting the faithful and building bridges, without actually de-
nying the new truths. They may, however, have an effect to decorate, extend or even alter it.

5. Community

The strongest feature, present in every language and in every religion, is a sense of Community. Both languages and religions are social phenomena, bringing companies of human beings together, and forging them as groups. According to the common saw, the family which prays together, stays together. It is equally widely believed – especially in the political discourse of the monolingual – that folk who can talk together, are more likely able to live, or at least work, together. It is certainly true that membership of a faith group, and of a speech community, gives each member an identity, which is reinforced (usually unconsciously) by every act of worship, every conversation shared, every document successfully read.

Religious communities differ from linguistic ones in that they are more consciously exclusive: it is apostasy – at least in the religions of the Semitic origin – to profess more than one religion, but it is if anything a virtue to boast competence in more than one language. (Buddhists, in general, find it easier to share their practitioners with other faiths.) Nevertheless, it turns out to be a singular, and important achievement, to bring a language group successfully into membership of a faith community.

This is because the members of the converting group will have to accustom themselves to view their own community differently. It was a jolt for the Nahuatl speakers of Mexico, thinking of themselves as defeated Aztecs and still only partially understanding the Spaniards, to start seeing their group identity as compatible with being Christians. Yet it happened, bringing Nahuatl- and Spanish-speaking Mexicans powerfully together in enthusiasm for Mary, both as Tonantzin and as Madre de Dios, provoked by the publication of tracts in both languages. But time has to pass for identities to change: all this occurred in Mexico a century after the miracle it told, the apparition of the Virgin – and probably more significantly, over a century after the Spanish conquest.

In an earlier era, the third century AD, power structures changed in the Roman Catholic Church when Latin came in from the cold: Latin, the local language of Italy, replaced Greek, first as its working language within the hierarchy, and then as the language used in worship and even theology.
This was a good ten generations after Paul had first preached the Gospel as an alien creed on the streets of Rome, and no more than a generation before Constantine and Theodosius would convert Christianity into Rome’s official faith. Ordinary Romans came to see themselves as Christians; and for this, the faith needed to speak their language.

The Christian faith community had by then spread into the East, changing vernaculars as it went, into Coptic, Ethiopic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, even Persian. But rather than resulting in a single Church, most of the new churches came to be associated with, even defined by, their vernaculars. Inevitably this process ran ahead of the production of new versions of the Scriptures, but ultimately, they all created canonical texts in their own languages. (It is notable that in Persia, which always contented itself with the Scriptures in Syriac, the Church did not ultimately survive.) The new churches remained conscious of their own languages, despite the differences among them. The diversity was not only good for spreading popular understanding, but reinforces a sense of national identity: the kingdoms which accepted the faith (Armenia in 301, Georgia in 317, Ethiopia in 330) were likewise conscious of their linguistic identity, as were the then Roman provinces of Syria and Egypt, not least because Christianity re-invigorated their literate traditions as separate from Greek.³

And curiously, the linguistic boundaries came to be theological ones, as new ecumenical councils (Nicaea 325, Constantinople 381, Ephesus 431, Chalcedon 451), kept re-defining the faith – and especially the Nature of Christ – in ways that one church or another could not accept.

Radical evangelism (such as was needed to spread the faith in sixth-century Europe, beyond the Mediterranean area) required some ability for preachers to contact pagans in their own languages, since Gaels, Germans, Nords and Slavs were largely monolingual. The preachers often responded by providing new alphabets and teaching people to read; the use of these alphabets gave the languages a manifest identity which was quite new. One result was that linguistic identity became bound up with religious identity, since the ones who knew what their language was were the newly literate, Christian, populations.

³ Coptic, Armenian and Georgian all owed their writing systems – hence literacy itself in these languages – to Christianity, as did the Goths and Slavs further west.
Goths and Slavs, who owed their Christianity ultimately to Greek evangelists from Constantinople, never ceased to associate their linguistic and religious identities, effectively creating new churches, which went on to have quite different fortunes.

But the rest of Europe had been converted by Catholics of the Latin rite, who insisted that the language had greater holiness because it was (parochially) seen as inseparable from Christianity. As a result, any recognition of a linguistic identity for their churches was delayed for a millennium. But with the Reformation of the sixteenth century, individual access to the Scriptures came to be seen as a priority – a right which implied that it must be possible for all to worship, and to study their Bible, in the vernacular. Translations followed, but somehow, this time, the new Protestant churches managed to transcend the identities that might have been given them by the particular languages of their founders. Protestant creeds were not united, and created many different communities: but their divisions, by and large, do not correspond to language: Lutherans do not, in general, speak German, nor Calvinists French.

Outside Christianity, the missionary religions insisted on their social identities – if anything – even more. Buddhism recognized the Sangha – the community of Buddhist monks – as one of the three jewels of the faith (triratna) comparable in importance with the Buddha and the Dharma, the founder and the teaching themselves. The Sangha as such has never been seen as divided formally by region or language, although it is arguable that there is far more diversity in schools of Buddhism than among the profusion of churches of Christianity.

In Gandhara (the centre of modern Afghanistan) Buddhists released from adherence to the Buddha’s own language developed a reputation as being close to the merchant community, not least because their monasteries – owing their endowment to rich merchants – were able in return to develop a banking service. It is not just a poetic metaphor which associates Buddhism with “jewels”, since the high-value items to which they referred in many of their Scriptural texts were the stock in trade of their community. In China, the productive programme of translations over several centuries meant that a corpus of religious texts was built up which was in some ways fuller than the Pali (and Sanskrit) originals. This in turn gave Chinese Buddhists the increasing sense that the faith was a religion of their own: with their own set of Buddhist classics in Chinese, they no longer needed to
seek enlightenment in India after the heroic exploits of scholars like Xuan-zang. Linguistic achievements therefore gave the Chinese, in particular, a new sense of their identity as Buddhists.

Islam is no exception to the rule that religions deliberately create communities. It insists on the importance of the Ummah, the community of Muslim faithful. This term, however, has been subject to some ambiguity, since it originally referred to the Arab nation, the whole company of people on earth who speak Arabic. Islam has had the problems of success, in that its faith – which it proclaims to be of universal value – has far outrun the community of Arabs, even though it insists that its revelation, the Qur’ān, is only truly available to those who understand the Arabic language.

It has succeeded in making this paradoxical requirement a reality – to the extent that the Ummah has now become the community of those who have studied Arabic in order to read the Qur’ān, whether or not they actually speak it, and the differences which do split the Ummah – as notoriously between Sunni and Shi’a – are not reducible to differences between language communities, but intersect them all.\footnote{This is true, even if most of the Shi’a congregation is found in countries where Persian is a familiar language.} This is one of many ways in which Islam is exceptional as a missionary religion.

**Conclusion**

This paper has sketched a number of ways in which the exposition of a missionary religion in a new language has affected what it is to be a believer of that religion.

Key technical terms may be replaced with words which have different nuance, or even a totally different reference. This might happen if no exact translation is available (e.g. for the Greek \textit{lógos} in Latin), or simply because some words were misheard (because of the close sounds of \textit{jñānam} and \textit{yānam}).

Grammatical properties of the words used in statements of the faith may not exist in new languages, or apply quite differently, as past and future markers apply principally to verbs in Spanish or Latin, but to noun-phrases in Tupi or Guaraní.
The authority given to written texts – quintessentially to Scripture – may differ in different cultures; and so new forms of scripture may be instituted, allowing quite a different content to these works: as Buddhism switched from memorized passages to lavishly decorated written texts (and concurrently from suttas in Pali or Gandhari language to sūtras in Sanskrit), the focus of the doctrine too changed, from the quest for individual enlightenment to a general compassion for all beings.

The constituent parts of the previous religion might be taken over as (now newly-interpreted) features of the new faith; and this re-purposing process for preserved “heirlooms” could range from re-identifying prior personages to the reverential language itself that had previously described a very different range of sacred events.

Finally, the very concept of the community which one belongs to would inevitably undergo a major overhaul as the converts begin to identify their own speech-group with membership of the new religion: the answer to the questions “who are our people?”, and how will I recognize a fellow member?” will change. But the unity of the faith might not survive its transmission to different speech groups, especially if new converts are then expected to identify which particular variants of the faith they adopt: in the long run, they are more likely to make the choice so as to be like their neighbours who speak the same language, than to follow, by argument, the doctrines of a wider Church.

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Endnotes

1 Cf e.g., Green 1998, pp. 283-5.
ratione consistens priorem eam ut substantiam suam ostendat.

3 Cyprian, *Adversus Iudaeos*, ii, 3; ii, 6.
4 Boyle 1977, p. 166.
5 It occurs in chapter 3 of the sutra. The Lotus Sutra, developed in the period 100 B.C. to 200 A.D., is more authentically the *Sad-dharma-puṇḍarika-sūtra*, the “True-Law-Lotus-Sutra.”

6 The idea is due to Seishi Karashima, speaking at the University of Hamburg on May 8, 2012: “Vehicle (yāna) and Wisdom (jñāna) in the Lotus Sutra—the Origin of the Notion of Yāna in Mahāyāna Buddhism” (http://tinyurl.com/q8efgcl). We do have another example of precisely this mistake being made by Lokakṣema, a Kuśāṇa translator of the second century A.D. Lokakṣema’s mistake was also detected by Karashima 1992, and signalized in Boucher 1998, p. 491.

7 Zajicová 1999, p. 151
8 Triana y Antorveza 1987, p. 414
9 Ximénez c. 1710, cap. iv, fol. 34 recto; ed. Chinchilla, p. 70
10 Ximénez 1929, vol. i, chapter xxv
11 The system is analysed, for both Tupi and Guaraní, in Bossong 2009, pp. 7-13.
12 Due to Navarro 2004, p. 109
13 Matthew xxvi.39, 43; Mark xiv 36; Luke xxii 42
16 Geiger 1916[1943], pp. 6-7, referring to *Cullavagga* v.33.1. This reads, in full: *na bhikkha-ve buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropetabhaṃ yo āropaya, āpatti dukkatassa. anujānāmi bhikkhave sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanaṃ pariypunitun ti:* “O Monks, do not render the word of the Buddha into *chandas*. Whoever does so, is guilty of an offence. I give you, O Monks, permission to learn the word of the Buddha in own dialect.” *Vinaya Piṭakaṃ* 2: 139) The phrase is actually singular (so literally “dialecit” not “dialects”); and there is no explicit pronoun, so whose ‘own’ dialect is not stated.
17 *Saddharmapuṇḍarika Sutra*, chapter 10 (Buddhist Text Translation Society)
18 Sachse 2016. This whole analogy has been revealed by Frauke Sachse. The relevant passage of the Popol Vuh is folios 23v-32v.
I would like to introduce my topic by way of a personal story. Last May I had gone to school to bring my 11-year-old daughter her packed lunch which she had forgotten at home. At the school corridor I saw her class teacher, Mr. A. and we started chatting. I don’t quite remember how we began talking about the role of faith in children’s language and literacy development, but I distinctly remember his remark that he had never really thought about the relevance or importance of faith in children’s learning. Mr A. is a very thoughtful teacher who encourages his students to ask questions and discover knowledge. Later that day, Mr. A. sent me the following email:

Hi again,
Interestingly and coincidently, just after you left a classmate wrote this: What does this small action idea make you think / understand about our central idea? It makes me think that anyone can make a difference, no matter what age, race, gender, or nationality. It shows us that there are more important things than ourselves, and that no one should be alone in the world. We were not made to be alone, we were made so that we could comfort, not kill, so that we could heal, not hurt, and so that we could help our earth become the better, cleaner, kinder earth that God created it to be. Juan Mann’s story shows us that no one should suffer being alone. We are all humans. We are all equal. We are all His creations, and He blessed each and every one of us differently, but all the same, he blessed each and every one of us. I think that the Free Hugs campaign was a small bit, but it helped the people he hugged, and the people who saw, and cared. Funny time, non?
- a

The child was reflecting on the Free Hugs movement that sprang up in 2004 in Australia. It was initiated by Juan Mann from Sydney who started giving free hugs in his local shopping mall. His actions were spurred by the realisation that people were living increasingly disconnected lives and
wanted to do something about it. The idea caught hold of people’s imagination and spread across the globe. The children had been talking about how the actions of a single person could affect the lives of so many as part of the central idea of their unit of inquiry: “Through small actions, everyone can make an impact.”

What struck me when I read the child’s response was how powerful and personal it was; but also how she was using a religious frame to make sense of academic learning (in this case reflecting upon how the story of Juan Mann was related to the central idea of the unit and evaluating his actions). I was particularly struck by the language and how it resembled a sermon (“we were not made to be alone, we were made so that we could comfort, not kill, so that we could heal, not hurt, and so that we could help our earth become the better, cleaner, kinder earth that God created it to be”) but also what this very short piece of writing revealed about the child’s sense of self, how their faith seemed to be central to their understanding and interpretation of the world and their place within it (“We are all His creations, and He blessed each and every one of us differently, but all the same, he blessed each and every one of us”). As an educator, I pondered the question that if we are to build our pedagogies drawing on all children’s linguistic, cultural and social resources surely we cannot ignore children’s faith literacies nor consider them irrelevant to their academic learning. As the child’s reflections reveal, for many children around the world these are important resources for learning and identification that cut across home, school and community. But what do we actually know about children’s faith related languages and literacies?

As the studies in Lytra, Volk and Gregory (2016) attest, we do know that faith underpins the everyday experiences of many children and adults. It has been viewed as an important source of support, comfort and hope, as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of a globalised world and partake in multilingual, multicultural, multiethnic and multi-faith societies. This is especially the case for individuals and communities new to a country or facing hardship and discrimination. For instance, scholars have examined the significance of the Black Church in the US in supporting African American youth to develop resilience and educational achievement (Barrett 2010, Haight 2002, McMillon and Edwards 2000, Peele-Eady 2011, 2016). Others have investigated the role of faith as a source of spiritual and material support to resist the racism and marginalisation many Latino children and their families in the US face in their daily lives (Baquedano-López
and Ochs 2002, Ek 2005, Volk 2016). Nevertheless, within Educational Studies, the role of faith in children’s learning, socialisation and personal and collective identification remains an emergent field of inquiry. Most often than not, schooling and wider society tend to ignore or disparage the role of faith in children’s educational achievement, socialisation and identity development or unfavourably compare it to that of school literacies (Dávila 2015, Genishi and Dyson 2009, Gregory, Long, and Volk 2004, Long 2016, Skerrett 2013). Mr A.’s remark that he had never really thought about the relevance or importance of faith in children’s learning is indicative of many teachers’ stance towards faith literacies.

This educator’s stance is compounded by the fact that faith is often perceived as a very private, deeply personal matter. This is compounded by the belief that only if one is a member of the faith community one can truly understand the religious rituals and sacred texts (Fader 2009, Sarroub 2005). These widely held perceptions have been intensified by the secularisation of social life and the compartmentalisation of the secular and the religious spheres in many contemporary societies around the world. At the same time, there is a growing realisation of the “entanglement” of the secular and the religious and the existence of more porous and fluid boundaries (Baquedano-López and Ochs 2002: 175).

Rather than ignoring or disparaging faith literacies, in our work we take a view of faith as an essential part of culture; a complex and multifaceted cultural practice that is embedded in specific sociocultural, historical and political contexts and is passed down from one generation to the next, providing children and adults with membership and a sense of belonging (Lytra, Volk and Gregory 2016). In this respect, becoming a member of the faith community entails acquiring the necessary language and literacy-oriented skills to partake in the rituals of the faith community. Equally importantly, as we saw in the child’s reflections at the beginning of this paper, it entails acquiring particular ways of being, acting and seeing the world through religious frames of understanding, interpretation and belonging. Moreover, faith learning has an additional moral and spiritual dimension that distinguishes it from learning in other contexts: ultimately, the knowledge, competences and performances a child learns and perfects over time are the means to build a relationship with a higher and eternal being (Gregory and Lytra 2012). In the ensuing sections, I present and discuss our ethnographic study of children’s engagement with faith literacies in present day London.
The study

Our multi-sited team ethnography “Becoming Literate in Faith Settings: Language and Literacy Learning in the Lives of New Londoners” examined how sixteen children aged between four and twelve from Bangladeshi Muslim, Ghanaian Pentecostal, Polish Catholic and Tamil Hindu communities were becoming literate through faith activities in London. The faith communities were chosen because they represented recent migration to London (from the 1950s onwards) (Gregory et al 2009). From 2009 to 2013, we worked as a team of 11 researchers, sharing different linguistic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, age, gender, professional and educational circumstances, religious and no religious beliefs. We worked with four families from each of the faith communities, their faith leaders and faith teachers as well as older members of the communities across three sites, namely places of worship, homes and religious instruction classes.

The purpose of our study was to investigate the following questions: (1) What is the scope and nature of literacy practices in each faith setting? (2) How do teaching and learning take place during faith literacy activities across different settings? (3) In what ways have faith literacy activities changed over time, in the London setting and across generations? and (4) How does participation in faith literacies contribute to individual and collective identities? We collected a wide range of data including demographic and historical data, fieldnotes, audio and video-recordings of faith activities across sites, interviews, scrapbooks, photographs and other artefacts (see Gregory and Lytra 2012 and Lytra et al 2017 for further discussions of the project methodology). Throughout the data collection and analysis, we sought to make “children’s experiences, perspectives and understandings visible and audible” (Lytra et al 2017: 216).

Children’s faith literacies

First, I will share some examples of children’s faith inspired text-making which they created for their scrap books. At the beginning of the second year of the project, we gave each child an A4 size scrapbook with multi-coloured pages and asked children to write, draw and stick in it what they considered important about their faith and wished to share with us. The examples of text-making come from one of the four faith communities, the Tamil Hindu/Saiva faith community. This was the faith community...
I worked with. Saivaisms is a branch of Hinduism. Saivaites believe that Lord Siva is the ultimate deity and all other deities are avatars of Him, an incarnation or manifestation of God. Sri Lankan Tamil migration to the UK was due to socio-economic and educational concerns followed by the deterioration of relations between the Singhalese majority and the Tamil minority, which culminated in a 25-year civil war (1983-2009). In the UK, Sri Lankan Tamils have sought to sustain their contested language, culture and identity in their country of origin for the next generation.

The first image depicts a colourful representation of Lord Hanuman, worshiped as a symbol of physical strength, perseverance, and devotion, in a praying position.

Image 1: Lord Hanuman

The second is a pencil drawing of the Goddess Saraswati, the Goddess of knowledge, music, and the arts, sitting on a lotus flower and playing the veena (a chordophone instrument). The child who made the drawing also wrote a short explanatory text for our benefit: “Saraswati the consort of Brahma is the goddess of learning. Every day we should pray to her before starting our studies”.

Image 2: Goddess Saraswati
The third image represents the Ther festival, the public procession of Gods and Goddess in ornate chariots in the streets around the Temple. As depicted in the drawing, devotees in traditional dress (sari for women and veshti for men) gather around and pray. The child drew herself in the left corner of the drawing and inserted a playful touch, a sticker of a colourful bee.

The last image made by one of the youngest children who participated in our study is a drawing of flower offerings to God at the Temple. The child added a short explanation: “These are the flowers you put for god” [image 4]. After the completion of the scrap books, the researchers went through them page by page with the children. The children were encouraged to talk about why they had chosen to include a particular God, faith story or special religious celebration (such as the Ther festival), and how particular symbols and rituals depicted in their text-making (such as the symbols of the lotus flower and veena, and offering flowers to God) related to their everyday lives.
The children’s text-making drew on the rich visual imagery of Hinduism to bring together different aesthetic preferences, genres and linguistic and cultural threads from diverse sources. The short explanatory texts alluded to the ‘school genre’ of explanatory writing whose purpose is to convey information clearly and accurately. The aim of the explanatory texts about Goddess Saraswati [image 1] and the flower offerings [image 4] seemed to be to explain Hinduism to a less informed audience and combine this information with the children’s own faith knowledge and experiences. The children also personalised their images, for instance, by sticking a playful bee on the side of the image of the Ther festival [image 3] and using vibrant water colours and a silver marker for the outline of Lord Hanuman [image 2].

Based on our observations, English was the language the children in our study felt most comfortable with to convey information and express her experiences and feelings about her faith. Tamil was very much a living language in the faith community, often used to communicate with parents and grandparents. Children also learned to read and write in Tamil, at Tamil school and in the religious instruction classes afterwards, which they attended on Sunday mornings. Tamil is also the devotional language of Tamils and it was used almost exclusively for Temple worship. The children’s knowledge of Sanskrit, the liturgical language of Hinduism, was restricted to prayers they learned to recite by heart. In their scrap books, children strategically used Tamil and a few instances of Sanskrit to refer to auspicious celebrations, religious and cultural concepts, names of God and titles of faith stories. In those instances, they transliterated the words into English, but occasionally used Tamil and Sanskrit scripts (for further discussion of children’s faith-inspired text making see Lytra et al 2016a, 2017). Indeed, the children’s text making united these different elements to “to create something that is greater than just the sum of the constituent parts” (Gregory et al, 2013: 323). Their text making revealed how their Tamil Hindu/Saiva religious identities were fostered through their participation in faith rituals and celebrations at home and in the Temple and through their engagement with a wealth of faith literacy activities in the religious instruction classes, such as collective praying, narrating faith stories and discussing the religious and personal meanings of key religious concepts (all the children’s scrap books can be accessed via the project web-site: www.belifs.co.uk).
A similar syncretising of linguistic resources with other modalities is evident in one of the children’s morning prayers in front of the family prayer alter (the video-recording made by the child’s older brother and transcribed and annotated by my co-researcher, Arani Ilankuberan, is available on the project web-site: www.belifs.co.uk). The child closes her eyes, places her palms together in prayer position and begins chanting the Gayathiri Mantra in Sanskrit seven times. The Gayathiri Mantra is addressed to God as the divine life-giver, symbolised by the Sun, and is most often recited at sunrise and sunset. The child then brings her hands down in front of her while keeping her eyes closed, as she recites the morning sloka (supplication) in Sanskrit once. The child places her palms again in prayer position and begins reciting her morning prayer in English. Afterwards, she performs the Thopukaranam ritual practice which consists of pulling on the ear lobes with the right hand tugging on the left ear and vice versa and squatting ten times. She ends her morning prayer ritual by applying Thiruneeru (white holy ash) with her finger in the form of a horizontal line across her forehead.

The highly scripted individual prayer the child engages in reminds us how learning to pray is an embodied experience, where children learn to draw on and combine a range of semiotic resources, including the use of different languages (in this occasion, literate forms of Sanskrit and English), gesture (the ritual practice of tugging one’s earlobes and squatting) and body posture (bowing head, closing eyes and placing palms in prayer position) and perform prayer by exhibiting appropriate feelings and sincere intentions. In this sense, we go beyond an exclusive focus on language as a meaning-making resource to examine the broader relationships between language and other communicative modalities, including gesture, body posture and image as well as the materiality and technological dimensions of these practices (Lytra et al 2016a). Moreover, prayer, whether individual or collective, is a moment-to-moment experience firmly rooted in the here-and-now (in our example to mark the beginning of the day) but it also links the children to a wider Saiva/Hindu congregation, both locally (in London) and transnationally (in Sri Lanka, in India and with other Saiva/Hindu communities across the globe). In this sense, it provides children with opportunities to practice and reaffirm their Hindu/Saiva faith and their religious subjectivities as an integral part of their on-going religious socialisation.
I trust that the examples I presented to you today illustrate that faith literacies do indeed matter. Rather than ignoring, silencing or dismissing the role of faith in children’s learning, socialisation and identity construction, our work has foregrounded the sense of membership and belonging children develop in the context of their respective faith communities. This feeling of connectedness spans across generations, time and space. While becoming socialised into the rules for participation and engagement in their respective faith communities, appropriate dispositions and emotional responses, religious and cultural heritage and histories, they also learn to navigate multilingual and multicultural spaces bringing together and syncretising different sets of linguistic and cultural resources.

The importance of children being able to flexibly draw on their different linguistic and cultural resources to develop their faith literacies was reiterated by the faith teachers at Tamil school as well as in the other faith settings we worked with. As one of the faith teachers in the Tamil school eloquently put it:

“I think we need to have use of both languages. If you stick to only Tamil, say we are Tamils we got to speak to the children in Tamil, you’re going to lose out some of the children, because if the children can’t understand what we are saying, especially in terms of faith, we are missing out, we’ll be losing a good opportunity, and children will be losing interest, and if they can’t understand, obviously, they’re not going to come to the classes.”

As we claimed in Lytra et al (2016b: 10), his reflections illustrated “an awareness of the cognitive and linguistic demands faith literacy learning placed on children to access the religious curriculum in Tamil only”. In addition, they demonstrated “a recognition that while Tamil school had been set up to maintain and promote a persecuted language, culture and identity in the country of origin (Sri Lanka), the main focus of faith lessons in contemporary London was not Tamil language and literacy development per se”. Rather, the main aim of faith lessons was to support children’s understanding of the principles, beliefs and values of Hinduism/Saivaism and help them make sense of highly symbolic and metaphysical concepts by relating them to their own lives in present day London.
In the current climate of political, social and religious tensions where media portrayals often stereotype or misrepresent the experiences of members of minority faith communities or privilege dominant narratives of majority faith communities, our work brings to the fore the wealth and complexity of languages, literacies, heritages and identities in faith settings in London. We believe that it is critical to listen to, learn and seek to understand from the children, their families and faith communities and to avoid stereotypes and dismissive or essentialising generalisations. For educators in particular, if we truly believe that an equitable education is the right of all students, then we must inquire into the teaching and learning practices in out-of-school contexts that are most meaningful to children’s lives, religious spaces being some of the most important ones. We hope that our work has taken a small step in this direction urging us to engage in dialogue and work collectively toward more pluralistic, democratic and equitable societies.

References

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In all previous religions, revelations were carried out in the language of the people they were aimed at. And, in the case of Islam, Allah revealed the Qur’an to the prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) in Arabic, which was the language of most of the people living on the Arab peninsula. As was also customary, this revelation was carried out orally because the prophet couldn’t read or write. Curiously, the first verse or ayah revealed to the prophet was "Iqra", very often translated as “learn”, “study”, or even “read”.

One of the most interesting facts about this revelation was the level of its language. At that time, the Arab population had a very high linguistic level and they were very proud of this achievement. The Qur’an was therefore revealed in a much higher and more complex level of language, precisely so that it would become a sign of the power and miracles of Allah and also that Muhammad is truly the new prophet and messenger. The same thing happened with Jesus (peace and blessings be upon him), who had the power to cure the sick, and with Moses (peace and blessings be upon him), who defeated all his opponents in the magic contests promoted by the Pharaoh of the time.

Consequently Islam, and especially its sacred texts such as the Qur’an, is essentially taught and passed on orally, albeit accompanied by reading and writing. This is not because everyone at that time was illiterate but because there are things in the Qur’an that cannot be taught without oral transmission. Learning is carried out in various settings including the home so that, if the parents and other adult members of the family are not involved, children cannot be taught properly.

For example, in principle the three letters in Arabic of م ل أ (equivalent to A, L and M), when placed in the same order, should be pronounced in the same way since they form the same word and this word should have the same meaning. Well, it doesn’t. In fact, in two different chapters (surah) of
the Qur’an we can find these letters in the same order and the only difference is that, in one case, they are joined together (ملا) while in the other they are separate (م ل). The result is that they have different meanings; in fact, the second case has no known meaning in Arabic and must therefore be learned as is, and this cannot be achieved without the oral guidance of a master or expert. Someone who can read will interpret both cases in the same way, applying the rules for written language, and they won’t understand why the letters are separate in once case and joined together in the other.

This means the oral teaching and transmission of Qur’anic studies is essential and the voice is used extensively as a result. Obviously, the nicer a person’s voice, the more popular they will be as a reciter and/or imam. In this respect, when visiting oratories and mosques to pray, and especially at times such as Ramadan, both in Barcelona and Catalonia and also in other locations, many Muslims prefer to go to those places with imams who have a particularly special voice, since this helps them to have a moving, profound and enthralling spiritual and mystical experience. Moreover, thanks to the effect of a particular voice and the very positive vibrations produced, the whole experience is greatly enhanced not only during the recitation but also afterwards.

However, those people who are not well-versed in classical Arabic may not be able to experience this fully because they don’t understand everything, since Islamic prayer and the reading of the Qur’an is carried out in that language. But they can take part fully in the talks and sermons that tend to be held in the local dialect combined with classical Arabic. Moreover, they probably also feel partly involved in the prayers through their hearts since the Islamic faith places great emphasis on the role played by the heart in the spiritual experience.

This doesn’t mean there is a specific register for spiritual activities and rituals and another, different register for ordinary, everyday life. Essentially, the difference lies in the fact that prayers and rituals are carried out in classical Arabic, which can be adjusted to the level of the people attending, while people tend to use the local dialect in their everyday lives, although it might not even be a dialect of Arabic.

This is what happens in practice in most cases, but that doesn’t mean writing isn’t important in Islam. Writing and documentation also play their part
in passing on the teachings of the Qur’an and, ultimately, in Islamic studies in general because, without them, the Qur’an might never have survived, intact, up to the present day.
Translating texts and the transmission of Tibetan Buddhism

Montse Castellà

Tibetan writing dates back to the 7th century when Buddhism was introduced into Tibet, in order to translate texts from India written in Sanskrit. That was how literary Tibetan came about, which is what the texts are written in. The translators were highly learned Tibetans: not only were they prominent experts in Sanskrit but they were also capable of grasping the intangible and indefinable dimension suggested by the texts, as well as having extensive knowledge of their own culture. Such factors played a fundamental role in preserving the essence of this spiritual tradition. The aim was not solely to translate the texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan since words are not merely the sum of the letters and, in particular, the textual language had to convey the spirit of the texts, it had to be revelatory and inspiring for the destination culture.

When Tibetan Buddhism reached western society we were faced with liturgical texts, written in the Tibetan language, from a far-off culture with a non-dual view of the world that is totally different from our theistic view. Even today, translating such texts represents a huge challenge.

Generally speaking, translators have mostly chosen to maintain the original language (Tibetan writing) followed by the translation and corresponding phonetic transcription (see the enclosed image). This decision means that the text can be recited in Tibetan, thereby respecting the importance, especially in oriental traditions, of the physiological component of words (the vibration). One example of this are the mantras or sounds which, through repetition, produce a vibration capable of triggering different qualities such as love or compassion.

Another example of the importance of the spoken word is what is known as lung. For a Buddhist to be able to meditate, they must receive the lung from a recognised master who has previously carried out this practice in particular. The lung is a rapid reading, in the original language, of a whole sadhana or ritual text. Oral transmission is therefore of the utmost importance. In fact, it is believed that true knowledge can only be passed on
from master to disciple and not by merely reading texts. This ensures a spiritual tradition remains alive and authentic.

Within the context of a perceived holistic reality, in which everything is interrelated and interdependent, texts (especially those related to meditative practices or sadhanas) place great emphasis on the interrelationship between the body, speech and mind. All practice involves these three elements simultaneously. These are known as the three “doors” through which we achieve the deepest dimension of Being, our true nature.

The UAB research group, Trafil, which I have belonged to since it was first set up, aims to raise awareness of and help promote the different languages and cultures involved in the process of translating and transmitting distant philosophies, in particular Tibetan Buddhism, and a database was constructed as a tool for translators. How can a language be translated that reflects a culture and a view of the cosmos that is totally different from our own? Obviously not by terms but by concepts since we found that several terms were often required to be able to translate a single concept. For instance, there are various Tibetan terms that tend to be translated as mind or consciousness but each one of them actually has its own particular features which cannot be described in our own languages in a single word. This is the case of sem, rigpa and chitta. Moreover, the fact that Tibetan Buddhism is a non-theistic, non-dual philosophy or religion often leads to serious translation errors. There are words such as karma or Buddha which we decided not to translate but use as loan words. This was because such words can be considered as relatively widespread in our culture, plus there is no equivalent term in our own language as they are alien concepts.

It should be noted that, for a spiritual tradition to continue being alive and inspiring for different cultures and over a long period of time, it must be able to adapt to the destination culture at any particular moment. Buddhism has shown itself to be flexible throughout its history, adjusting and adapting to the different cultures receiving it. And it is thanks to this flexibility that there is now a wide range of Buddhist traditions which, although different, all share the same fundamental principles and values.

It should also be remembered that Buddhism had always been passed on orally and the words of Buddha were not written down until 300 years after his death. In this respect, Buddhism scholars have long debated how faithfully the writings reflect what Buddha actually said. For this reason, when
reading and translating the texts, we must always bear in mind the conditioning factors inherent to a specific culture and differentiate between what is cultural and what is essential, separating the wheat from the chaff. That’s why the texts need to be constantly re-read in order to glean their whole meaning.

One of the most important cultural determinants to take into account when re-reading texts comes from the fact that most religions have emerged within a strongly patriarchal socio-cultural context with men at the centre and women, as well as nature, on the periphery. Consequently, most of the existing historical texts, both western and eastern, are based on an androcentric view. Texts and liturgies have been written by men for men and any reference to women tends to view them as an object and not a subject. Therefore, in the main, the views and experiences of women have always been excluded and silenced. It is also important to note that, in addition to such religions being passed on mostly through male-based lineages, the context has always been institutional and religious, with hierarchical and pyramidal structures.

So, today, how can we preserve and help to pass on the legacy of the wisdom of religions in our secular societies that value gender equality and create increasingly more horizontal social structures? How can we ensure that spiritual traditions continue to be a source of inspiration both for the men and the women of our time? Only by reaching the very heart of religions, the mystical or spiritual dimension, can we find their true value. The chaff (the socio-cultural determinants) has helped to protect these grains of wheat, to nourish them, but the time of ripeness, of maturity, has come and we must allow the seed to germinate.