

'Supposing that everyone in the world really could speak English, would that mean that learning any other languages was a waste of time?' Discuss.

With the increase in globalisation, languages are dying out at an ever-growing rate. We lose an average of one language per week, and some linguists believe we will have lost half the world's languages in the next one hundred years.¹ Therefore, the question of whether learning another language would be a waste of time if everyone could speak English is extremely topical and to answer it, we must examine language's effect on culture, the individual, and, hence, identity.

Ironically, but inevitably, the word 'language' is linguistically ambiguous. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines language as 'a system of conventional spoken, manual, or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves.'² The emphasis here on language's social role implicitly excludes formal languages (mathematical and programming languages). Furthermore, unlike in many other definitions, 'manual' symbols are mentioned as well as 'spoken' ones, including sign-language. 'Manual' symbols could also cover body language, however. Therefore, this essay will discuss language as outlined by Encyclopaedia Britannica's definition, but limiting 'manual' symbols to mean sign language.

Languages do not exist outside of time and space; they serve to articulate certain phenomena within their temporal, social, and geographic contexts. Hence, to learn another language is to experience another culture, as 'the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same worlds with different labels attached [the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis].'³ To assert that it would be a 'waste of time' to learn another language if everyone could speak English is to suggest not only that different languages filter reality in the same way, but that they describe the same reality. The view that language is an objective measure of a constant social reality, which is simply not the case. 'Language is a socio-historical product'⁴, and, as such, languages are infused with untranslatable social and historical nuances. For example, Japanese culture's emphasis on politeness, deference, and hierarchy is reflected by its variety of pronouns and honorifics, which are used to denote seniority, familiarity, and relative social status between speakers. For example, *senpai* is a respectful honorific for older people, those of more experience, or those of a higher rank. *Kōhai*, its opposite, refers to a younger, less experienced, or lower-status person, who is instructed and mentored by a *senpai*. One reason for the sheer number of such titles in the language is the importance of social and age differences in Japan's feudal past⁵. Therefore, one can enrich their understanding of a culture by learning the language.

We can also consider the cultural significance of languages for the members of the cultures themselves, separately from outsiders wishing to experience them. If everyone could speak English and adopted the attitude that there was no use in learning any other language, languages would inevitably begin to die out with generations. If language is a verbal expression of culture⁶, we can equate the death of languages with the death of cultures. L'Académie Française provides a very good example of a culture's confrontation with this reality; it emerged in 1635 to minimise the effect of Italian on French. In more recent years, globalisation, facilitated by technology, has posed the familiar threat of English invasion for the French, but through the non-physical medium of language. Anglicisms, largely tech-related ones, are increasingly common in the French language, and the

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/lera_boroditsky_how_language_shapes_the_way_we_think/transcript, 2017

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/language>

³ Sapir (1949)

⁴ Vygotsky (1978)

⁵ Reichauer (1994)

⁶ <http://star.edu.af/relationship-between-culture-and-language/>

organisation counters this by creating French alternatives in an attempt to assert France's status as a 'distinct world' from the Anglophone one. The motto of L'Académie Française (*A L'Immortalité*, to immortality) and the common French expression *Vive la France!* (long live France!) communicate France's concern with its own cultural immortalisation, which the academy attempts to ensure through immortalising (as far as is possible) the language. Hence, we can see the importance of language to culture.

Furthermore, the linguistic mirroring of geographic, religious, historical, and, ultimately, cultural conflicts compounds them, and emphasises the importance of language to cultural identity. One example is the conflict between India and Pakistan, reinforced by the separate linguistic identities of Hindi and Urdu, even though the two are mutually intelligible and are both derived from Hindustani. Consequently, the two languages could be understood to be dialects of Hindustani, although they use different scripts (an attempt to further distinguish between the two). However, because of India and Pakistan's ongoing geographic and religious conflict, Hindi and Urdu have been labelled separate languages; it reflects and reinforces the Indian and Pakistani, Hindu and Muslim, divides. The labelling of a language is political, and informs national and individual identity. Therefore, if linguistic distinction were eradicated, and everyone spoke English, so would cultural distinctions need to be. A universal language would therefore not just create linguistic homogeneity, but also cultural homogeneity.

Language is central not just to cultural identity, but also to individual identity, and the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis's focus is mostly how language shapes individual cognition; from this idea emerges linguistic determinism. As Wittgenstein said: 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.' Russian distinguishes linguistically between light blue, *goluboy*, and dark blue, *sinii*. Brain scans of Russian speakers looking at a colour progression from light to dark blue show a surprise reaction when they perceive the colour to have changed, whereas English speakers' brains do not.¹ The colour scale is objectively the same for both groups, yet is processed differently depending on a person's language. Language, hence, is the filter through which we perceive, or, rather, construct reality. In acting as a filter, language acts as a constraint, and the confines of our linguistic system inevitably 'narrow the range of thought'⁸, a theory weaponised by Orwell's totalitarian regime in *1984*. The likening of language to a dictatorial power is not unique to fiction, however; in one lecture, Barthes called language 'fascist' because 'fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech.'⁹ Sontag calls this Barthes's 'instantly notorious hyperbole'¹⁰, and it is also paradoxical, the aim being to provoke thought. Language, he proposes, is not 'fascist' because of what it withholds, but what it enforces. The statement is paradoxical because if he has the freedom to call language fascist, using language to do so, then how could this be the case, when fascism is suppressive? Barthes recognises this contradiction. There is a degree of power in the ability to make an utterance, but, he continues, '[you] can speak only by picking up what *loiters* around in speech', and therefore, 'once [you] speak [you] are both master and slave.' As well as the words that '[loiter]' in speech, there are the meanings for them that '[loiter]' in society, and, Barthes being a structuralist, this is important to discuss. Structuralism emphasises cultural context, and suggests there is an overarching system, or structure, that underlies all elements of society.¹¹ Therefore, the words we use have meaning beyond the meaning we intend, and in this sense we have very little control over how others' interpret us; language forces us into certain models which can never fully represent ourselves, or what we are trying to describe. Language, one could say, has its own agenda, which it enforces; it is fascist. This supports the linguistic determinism described by Sapir and Whorf in the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis.

⁸ Orwell, *1984* (1948)

⁹ Barthes (1977)

¹⁰ Sontag, *A Barthes Reader* (1982)

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structuralism>

Another reason for the fascism of language is the fact that 'speech is immediately assertive'. By this, Barthes means that 'language does not allow for the distinction between the simple utterance of a thing and the affirmation that it exists.' People assume language always expresses truth due to the logocentric idea that language is 'a fundamental expression of an external reality'¹². Orwell expounds on the danger of this. The characters in *1984*'s dystopian universe can simultaneously hold contradictory 'truths' in their mind (doublethink) because the language, Newspeak, asserts (automatically) that they are both true. Individuals could attempt to question this, but 'negation, doubt, possibility, the suspension of judgment require special mechanisms which are themselves caught up in a play of linguistic masks.'⁹ Therefore, our analysis of language is limited-we can only ever use language to critique it. The coda of T. S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* is applicable here : 'We think of the key, each in his prison. Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.'¹³ Language is a prison of sorts, which we confirm in our attempts to escape its limitations. In fact, any 'key' we could use to do so would also be linguistic. But linguistic determinism need not be pessimistic. Just as learning another language encourages cultural diversity, so can it engender individual nuance and variety of thought. If language so thoroughly defines and influences us, then we should embrace its power; we are born of it. We also share in this power-we can express and better know ourselves through language, so a rejection of it is a rejection of the self. Perhaps this is why Barthes said that 'any rejection of language is a death.'¹⁴

Let us consider a specific example of the oppression and authoritarianism of language. The languages of past colonial powers are authoritarian in first, their violent penetration into unwilling speech communities, and second, their continued oppression of the members of these originally distinct communities through language. The first can be seen with the US government's treatment of Native Americans. From the end of the 19th century through to the 1960s, the state forced tens of thousands of Native American children into English-only boarding schools where they were beaten for speaking their mother tongue. This remains relevant because, as we have explored through Japanese, Hindi, and Urdu, languages cannot be separated from their histories. As for the second, in many European languages, 'blackness itself is at best a figure of absence, or worse a total reversion'¹⁵, often being associated with evil and sin, whereas whiteness (the norm, and therefore the ever-present) denotes purity and innocence. Hence, we can see how language is used to oppress, which facilitated/facilitates colonialism and cultural assimilation (affecting both the collective and the individual). As language is central to cultural and individual identity, it is important to consider the question of whether learning other languages would be a waste of time if we could all speak English from different racial and ethnic perspectives. Let us consider the question from the perspective of Frantz Fanon, a black social philosopher born in Martinique, which the French colonised in 1636. Fanon argues that 'to speak [the coloniser's language] is to exist absolutely for the other [the coloniser]'.¹⁵ This is because language offers the coloniser control over the identity of the colonised, as language shapes cognition, and the words we use have cultural significance. Therefore, language is the last frontier of colonisation. Indeed, Fanon proceeds to say 'to speak [...] means above all to assume a culture.' The oppression of a people is therefore complete when their identity is necessarily filtered through the oppressor's language, meaning they fully assimilate into the oppressor's culture. A black person speaking French comes to internalise the racism prevalent in French society, as expressed through language. The internalisation of the narrative that black is bad, white is good gives rise to an inferiority complex that the black subject attempts to overcome by associating with the white majority; wearing a 'white mask'. This inevitably causes discordance between the black person's body and consciousness, a discomforting and painful experience that would theoretically persist so long as a black person has to speak the coloniser's language. Hence, the black and white experiences of the English language are not the same. A black person (or any person of colour) may benefit from

¹² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logocentrism>

¹³ T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland* (1922)

¹⁴ Barthes (no date)

¹⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967)

learning a non-European language to feel less defined by the white perspective of blackness, as communicated through language, helping them to have a healthier sense of self.

It is lastly important to consider the modern arguments for language learning. The current justification is utilitarian. 'Utilitarian arguments justify the learning of something on the grounds of extrinsic aims, normally economic or commercial'¹⁶. Everyone being able to speak English would this argument, and so we must consider others in reaching a judgement. Educational arguments emphasise intrinsic benefits that can enrich the learner, and this intrinsic joy is often overlooked in discussions of the utility of learning another language. The attitude that hobbies are a waste of time if they do not have a purpose besides self-fulfilment reduces our human worth to our economic output, and is symptomatic of the capitalist obsession with productivity and, ultimately, profit, as well as the recent emergence of 'hustle culture'. Erin Griffith sums this up as 'performative workaholism'¹⁷, and its rise is directly attributable to the technological revolution. Social media facilitates the dissemination of propaganda promoting overworking by big businesses, which then catch on as trends, like '#hustle'. As well as this, social media platforms encourage the conflation of employer/employee identity as employees are expected to advertise their passion for their job online (working is not enough; one must also enjoy it). Griffith points out that LinkedIn has created its own version of Snapchat stories (which allow people to log their day with photos and videos which others can view) to evidence this. It is therefore a radical assertion of the self and a bold rejection of the dominant culture to learn a language with the knowledge it cannot act as a tool for career advancement, and is purely for your own fulfilment. Language need not be a means to an end; it is an end in itself.

To conclude, language is central to identity, so learning others could never be a waste of time. The choice to do so is a healthy rebellion against and liberation from confining social ideals (such as racism communicated through language and the expectation that hobbies have practical applications), nurturing individual growth and fostering self-confidence. Furthermore, attempts to establish a universal language, like Esperanto, have failed for the same reason they were created; they are culturally barren (Zamenhof, the creator, hoped this would offer them universality). It is therefore clear that language and culture cannot be separated, and the individual cannot be separated from either. Linguistic diversity, consequently, promotes both cultural pluralism and individual variety of thought, which encourage the celebration and appreciation of differences, leading to a more inclusive and less hate-fuelled society. Language-learning is an exercise in empathy and self-awareness, which there are a lack of today, largely due to the rise of technology¹⁸. These are both important tools for understanding oneself, and others. Imagine the uniformity and narrow conception of identity in a world where everyone spoke the same language, and nobody ever made any effort to broaden their linguistic horizons. A monolingual society is akin to a dystopia, and should be avoided at all costs.

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¹⁶ Williams, *Why Teach Foreign Languages in Schools? A philosophical response to curriculum policy*

¹⁷ Griffith, (2019)

¹⁸ <https://www.zurich.com/en/knowledge/topics/global-risks/decline-human-empathy-creates-global-risks-age-of-anger>

Blessing Verrall

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