LANGUAGE TRAVELS: REFLECTIONS OF AN ORANGE-JUICE DRINKER

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Abstract

This address views languages through the lens of travels or, alternatively, refracts travels through the lens of languages.

Introduction: A language suitcase

The first half of my title 'Language Travels' carries a suitcase of meanings. It refers to language experiences in my travels through parts of Asia and Europe. Simultaneously, it signifies that language moves with people movements, and also squeezed into the suitcase is the etymological reality that language travels through word borrowings. Regarding the second half of the title about orange juice, the meaning will soon become apparent.

'It's all Greek to me'

My adventures with orange juice began as a child. My parents were born in Greece and both were post-war emigrants; they met and married in Australia. When I was aged seven and my sister ten, my parents decided to return to Greece for a period of one year. We travelled aboard a Greek-owned cruise ship, which was a child's oceanic playground. My favourite drink on this ship became orange juice, but my profound predicament was that I could not pronounce it in Greek, so I compromised with 'portka' — my solution to the tongue-twister of 'portokalada'. Before long, I acquired the nickname of 'orange juice' and was hailed with the greeting 'Yassou, portokalada' wherever I roamed on the ship.

Once in Greece, my sister and I attended Greek school for nine months. Although we had learnt Greek as a spoken language at home in Australia, we had not attained literacy. With the valiant efforts of the teachers, this was to be achieved in the Greek school.

By the time we boomeranged back to Australia, all the Greek that had been poured into me had displaced all my English. Everything had been erased, like a blackboard, and when I re-entered primary school I had to repeat the same grade because of my non-existent English language skills. I was called 'the little Greek girl', though I was Australian-born and an Australian citizen. This entangled issue of language and identity is something that most first generation Australians grapple with.

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Of language and (sometimes mistaken) identity

Of Australia's current population of 21 million, about 15% speak a language other than English, the two most common being Italian and Greek, reflecting post-war emigration patterns.[1] However, Australia is becoming increasingly monolingual, according to a university report released this year.[2] For instance, in the 1960s statistics show that 40% of Year 12 students graduated with a second language. This figure has now plummeted to 13%, since learning a foreign language is no longer compulsory in secondary schools. Moreover, foreign languages have also been drastically reduced in universities. Hence, the prospect of a monolingual nation also raises concerns about a monocultural mindset.

For me, questions of language and identity have become more complicated the more widely I have travelled and the more diversified my academic interests have become. I began in the discipline of anthropology, drifted into socio-linguistics, and taught English as a second language for ten years in Malaysia. There, I shifted my attention to museology, the study of museums, and eventually I went on to write my doctoral dissertation on the museums of Malaysia. From the material world of artefacts, my research has expanded to include 'oral artefacts', that is, the field of oral history, with a particular focus on the Aegean region, the site of my own ancestry.

After the childhood visit to Greece, my next visit was thirty years later to collect artefacts for a museum exhibition in Malaysia. On this second trip, my first act in Athens was to order an orange juice (and, on reflection, I view it as an attempt to prove to myself mastery of the language). Before the waiter appeared, I remember silently practising the word, anxious lest my tongue betray me. The waiter appeared; I ordered 'portokalada' without any mishap. But the immediate response was: 'Where are you from?' Although I had pronounced the word correctly, caution had been my undoing: enunciating each syllable rather than cascading them together. This only reinforced a language lesson already known: as soon as you open your mouth, you provide clues as to who you are — or who you are not.

Although I have returned to Greece several times, each time the feeling of foreignness accrues. I speak the language, but there are little linguistic signs that indicate I am foreign-born. Firstly, there is my outdated vocabulary: my parents isolated and insulated in Australia did not acquire the lexical changes that occurred in Greece. Secondly, because Greek was learnt at home, I never developed a competent usage of the formal second person plural used for strangers and politeness. When in Greece, I was always self-correcting my inappropriate usage of this pronoun.

Greece has a population of nearly 11 million of which an estimated 1 million are immigrants, with varying degrees of linguistic competence, and who are treated with varying degrees of acceptance. How foreign I could be was clearly illustrated during a visit last year. I was in a museum in Thessaloniki and had spent hours taking copious notes, all the while shadowed by a female security guard, even into the restroom. What had evoked such suspicions? Was it my obsessive scribbling in a notebook? Or, rather, was it my defective Greek — earlier, when I had

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spoken to the security guard, I had used the incorrect pronoun. Was it this that made her assume I was an immigrant and, as a corollary, to be kept under constant surveillance?

Of foreigners and (sometimes) foreign languages

This idea of foreignness is encapsulated in a word that has vast linguistic mileage. In commercial airline terminology it would have gained enough points to be labelled a 'frequent flyer'. The word owes its etymological roots to the Germanic tribe of 'Franks'. This versatile item of vocabulary spread throughout the Muslim trade routes into Africa, India and Southeast Asia. 'Frank' came to characterise a foreigner or stranger, and was usually applied to someone of Western or European stock. The Arabic term is 'Faranji', the Persian 'Farangi', the Turkish 'Frengi', the Dravidian 'Farengi', the Chinese 'Fo-lang-ji', the Malay 'Feringgi', and the Thai 'Farang'.[3]

At an early stage of my language travels I learnt that words travel and often they carry different phonetic baggage. While teaching English in Malaysia, an expatriate colleague and I decided to go sightseeing across the border into Thailand. On a stroll, we came across a gaggle of children who greeted us with a chorus of 'Farang! Farang!' We did not know the Thai language but we knew enough Malay to decipher 'Farang' from the Malay 'Feringgi' for foreigner.

Having lived in Malaysia for a decade, I absorbed Malay through immersion in a living speech environment. Malay belongs to the Austronesian language family, which is a classic example of language diffusion through population movements and, in this case, through impressive maritime journeys. Austronesian travelled as far west as Madagascar off Africa's coast and as far east as Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean.[4] By the fifteenth century in maritime Southeast Asia, the Malay language had become the lingua franca of the region, and note 'franca' from those foreign Franks again.

Malay is the national language of Malaysia and is called Bahasa Malaysia ('bahasa' denotes both 'language' and 'politeness'). Similarly, it is the national language of neighbouring Indonesia, where it is designated as Bahasa Indonesia.[5] Once, when attending a museum conference in Indonesia,[6] I spoke in Malay to one of the Indonesian delegates. She replied, 'I see you're from Malaysia.' I was a Malaysian because, unlike an Indonesian, I spoke the language without the trilled 'r' and certain honorifics were identifiable as Malaysian-Malay rather than Indonesian-Malay.

Malaysia is renowned for its ethnic diversity, which yields a kaleidoscope of languages, with the total numbering 140.[7] Although Malay is the national language, English is a compulsory subject in schools and recently the Ministry of Education switched the instruction of two science subjects from the Malay language to English. The educational system also includes Chinese-medium and Tamil-medium schools, since Chinese and Indians make up a significant proportion of Malaysia's population of 26 million. Most Malaysians are bilingual and a considerable number are trilingual.

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The most surprising linguistic discovery in Malaysia is Portuguese. In the early sixteenth century the Portuguese conquered the thriving trading port of Malacca. The conquerors encouraged marriages between Portuguese men and local women, resulting in the creation of a Eurasian community. Some 500 years afterwards, their descendants still speak the archaic Portuguese dialect of Kristang. The Portuguese Eurasian Association, the Portuguese Cultural Society and the Kristang Cultural Troupe are some of the community mechanisms for maintaining the language.

'Chinese wall' and 'English corner'

Apart from my long residence in Malaysia, my journeys have taken me to numerous countries in Asia including Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei and surrounding parts of Borneo, Vietnam, Macau, Hong Kong (which was then British-ruled), and mainland China. None of these have been prolonged sojourns, excepting China, where I spent two months in 1998 teaching English to university students in the picturesque town of Suzhou, south of Shanghai. In those two months I am ashamed to admit I learnt nothing except common courtesies and the numbers 1-5 in Mandarin, which is a tonal language full of semantic pitfalls for vocal cords. Beyond the academic cocoon, English as a medium of communication was utterly useless. However, because the Malay language has accumulated a stockpile of Chinese loan-words, what had been borrowed in Malaysia could be paid back in China.

My first morning in China I rose at dawn and rambled through the autumn mist. On the campus no students were evident, only groups of senior citizens exercising, some to the accompaniment of music, some to a sequence of numbers (this is how I learnt the numbers 1-5) and some were doing tai chi with fans, and others martial arts with swords (resembling a scene from a kung fu movie set). Visually, everything was so quintessentially Chinese. Wanting to be doubly sure of where I would be teaching later in the day, I plotted my course for the languages building. As I approached, I could hear a strident American voice slicing through the misty silence. I then realised it was a radio broadcast blaring from loudspeakers attached to the building. My first day in China and I was welcomed by a Voice of America transmission. Another language lesson had been learnt: expect the unexpected.

Another unexpected language encounter was nearby the university (founded by missionaries in 1900), when an elderly man shuffled towards me, raised his arms and cried out: 'Hallelujah!' I stopped and hoped for enlightenment. He pointed to a tucked-in street where a church spire was partially visible. Not knowing English, not being able to communicate the proximity of a church, which he thought would have been of interest to me, a foreigner — a 'Fo-lang-ji', he had struck upon the word 'hallelujah' to convey his message. He, like all of us, when confronted by a Chinese wall (an apt figure of speech) of language exclusion, managed to circumvent it with improvisation.

The bane of my two-month stint in China was the 'English corner', which took place every Friday afternoon in a manicured corner of the campus. It was where native English speakers were shanghaied and bombarded for hours with questions from hundreds of eager-eyed

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students, impatient to practise their conversational English. Their incisive questions would range from the political to the personal. The first question at my first 'English corner' was memorable. The student asked: 'Why should we Chinese learn English and not the rest of the world learn Mandarin?' — A thought-provoking question issuing from one Chinese out of population of more than 1.2 billion. The ranking of the world's major languages may vary slightly, according to the formula used, but Chinese is always in number one position, due to demographic magnitude.[8]

Language lessons from Australian history

Demographics should not be considered in isolation from geopolitics. When Australia aligned its foreign policy with its geography and positioned itself firmly in the Asia-Pacific region in the 1990s, an Asian Languages strategy was instituted in schools, but this was abolished after eight years[9] and, as previously mentioned, the nation is slipping into a monolingual delusion. I attended secondary school in the 1970s, in the era when foreign languages still had merit. At that time Australia looked culturally to Europe and thus school curricula only accommodated European languages. If it had not been geographically in the antipodes, Australia could have bid for entry into the European Union — purely on the basis of how European it was linguistically.

This year Romania and Bulgaria entered the European Union, making a total of 23 official languages. Interestingly, English, German and French are the three languages most widely spoken in the EU.[10] Equally interesting is a comparison to my school days: in addition to the national language English, we were schooled in German and French.

At secondary school I studied one year of Latin, two years of German and six years of French. Of my Latin I remember only 'Salwe magistra', the salutation to our teacher the moment she stepped into the classroom. Through sheer force of repetition, it has lodged in the memory. Everything else in that year of Latin has died and, since it is a dead language, I was never troubled by the disconcerting idea that I would be expected to communicate in it. Little has remained of my German either, just fragments and inexplicably a totally irrelevant expression, which has not been dislodged by the inexorable passage of time. It is: 'Was du kanst nichts schilaufen?' — What, you cannot ski? The abiding mystery is why have I kept this linguistic oddity, like a priceless treasure in my memory banks all these years?

With French the language learning was more sustained, but the emphasis was not on conversational French; it was a grinding, grammatical approach. The objective was to make students literate in French. This pedagogical approach did not prepare us to converse in French and so we remained largely mute.

Re-introduction to French (and initiation into Turkish)

It was only two years ago that I made my first — and unplanned — trip to France. I was in Turkey staying with a friend who works as a tour guide and, due to a last minute change, she was asked to accompany a tour group of Turks to Paris for one week. I joined the group.

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Being the sole non-Turk among non-English speaking Turks, I made rapid progress learning Turkish in France. Conversely, to produce any French was an ordeal, exacerbated by the fact that my first name is French, which paints a deceptive picture of my identity. Questions posed by French-speakers seemed to possess the alarming speed of their famed super trains and my mind would frantically rake over the scrap heap of language gone rusty with decades of disuse. To cobble together a sentence took an inordinate amount of mental labour and time. By the time I answered, the interlocutor could have climbed to the top of the Eiffel Tower.

Nevertheless, there is a positive note. Because I had learnt French in a formal classroom setting, divorced from reality, the second person plural, the polite form was deeply embedded in my head. This may be contrasted with my Greek language learning in the home environment and hence my difficulty with the polite pronoun for strangers. This dreaded pronoun haunts me in Turkish as well. In France learning Turkish in the intimate confines of the tour group, the second person singular was used and now it is near impossible to rid myself of this instinctive usage.

Turkish pronouns are not the only stumbling block; there are also 'building blocks': the language has an agglutinative structure wedded to vowel harmonies (which can build from a single word an edifice of a whole — and harmonious — sentence).

Interpretations (of words and people)

I first travelled to Turkey in the year 2000 for an oral history conference in Istanbul,[11] and we were taken on a bus tour of the city. I noticed a billboard with the word 'zaman', which translates as 'time' or 'era' and I had recognised it through the Malay language. 'Zaman' is actually an Arabic word and both the Malay and Turkish languages contain Arabic loan-words. On the bus I was discussing these Arabic loan-words in English with the Spanish interpreters of the conference. A conference delegate, with a distinctly Australian accent interrupted, and asked, 'Where are you from?' My reply of 'Australia' proved inadequate and she continued, 'Yes, but where are you *really* from?' Perhaps, I did not look sufficiently Anglo-Saxon.

On the other hand, in New Zealand, wherever I went, the standard remark was: 'You must be an Ozzie.' Australians ('Ozzies') and New Zealanders ('Kiwis') sound identical to outsiders but there are miniscule speech differences, which only the two nationalities can discern.

A few months after meeting the Spanish interpreters in Turkey I had an opportunity to visit them in Spain. I knew not a word of Spanish and, as long as I did not open my mouth, no one suspected I was a foreigner. I spent most of my time in Barcelona, the capital of the province of Catalonia, where the struggle for political autonomy and cultural identity were inseparable from the preservation of the ancestral Catalan language. Towering over Barcelona is an imposing monument of Christopher Columbus, gazing across the sea, and across the seas the Spanish language travelled, conquered, and settled in Central and South America. When the

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monument was erected in the late nineteenth century, the Catalans claimed Columbus as one of their own, though he was Genoa-born.[12]

A true son of Catalonia was Antoni Gaudi, the visionary architect who designed extraordinary, surreal buildings. I visited his architectural masterpieces of enchantment, thinking the whole time that he was the etymological source of 'gaudy', that is, something brilliantly colourful or extravagantly garish. I mused that I was witnessing language as physical construction, not merely construction in the abstract sense. When I was informed that Gaudi could not be credited with 'gaudy' (which is, in fact, derived from Latin), the adjective lost much of its colour.

Possibly due to some peculiarity in my personality, I enjoy finding myself in etymological landscapes. On one occasion when crossing a bridge over a river in Turkey, I was thrilled to discover it was this very river, Menderes, which had delivered to us the word 'meander'. According to ancient belief, the meandering course of the river inscribed every letter of the Greek alphabet. On another occasion I toured the ancient site of Pergamun and was overjoyed to be physically present in the city, which had given its name (via a meandering linguistic trail) to the word 'parchment'.

I have returned to Turkey many times, mostly to conduct oral history research. Earlier this year, I was negotiating my way through a Turkish bazaar, often frequented by tourists. Stall-keepers possess a wide repertoire of theatrics to attract attention, and to one particularly persistent fellow I responded in Turkish 'no thanks'. The youth apologetically replied in Turkish, 'Sorry, sister, I didn't realise you were a Turk.' This issue of language and identity has been a recurrent motif in my language travels.

For example, in 2004 I was attending a conference in Turkey,[13] and my cousin travelled from Greece for a reunion. The two of us were talking in Greek, and naturally in the informal second person singular. A delegate overheard our conversation and she said in Greek, 'So, you're both from Greece, as well?' My cousin later teased me by saying, 'There's no escaping it — you're a Greek.' To which I replied, recalling my losing battles with pronouns, 'As long as I don't talk to strangers.'

Supping on alphabet soup (in the Tower of Babel)

At this same conference in 2004 I had the good fortune to meet Professor Tatiana Iaţcu and we put into practice the conference theme, *[City in (Culture] in City)*, by exploring the culture of Izmir city. After one particularly hot, gruelling walk, we stopped for refreshments. Professor Iaţcu ordered a beer and I an orange juice. The first was accomplished swiftly but the second triggered a drama of interpretation. No amount of elaboration or sign language proved efficacious and finally the waiter whipped out his mobile phone, talked in Turkish, and handed the phone to me so that I could explain to an English speaker. The waiter reclaimed the phone, listened, and then exclaimed jubilantly, 'Ah, portakal!' Professor Iaţcu commented, 'It's the

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same word in Romanian!' and she added, 'I never knew I knew so much Turkish.' Shamefaced, I contributed, 'And I knew the word in Greek!'

Perhaps the best alphabet soup or *çorba*—as its known in Turkish, and its Greek and Romanian derivative forms—was savoured in the month of May in 2005. I was in Turkey to co-present a paper with my Turkish colleague on oral history[14] in which we spoke of the parallel refugee experiences of our respective Greek and Turkish forbears. One section of the paper was devoted to hybrid terms, shared vocabulary, as well as the linguistic hold of Turkish words in the Greek language and the tenacity of the Greek language among Turks whose ancestors had originated in Crete.

After this conference, I travelled to Romania to present a seminar on the absorption of Malay words in the English language.[15] Meanwhile, in social contexts in Romania, my ear picked up a handful of Greek and Turkish loan-words. Furthermore, whilst in Romania to speak about Malay loan-words in English, I had to haul out French from its deep hibernation. After meeting Professor Iaţcu's parents, we had no common language in which to communicate, until her father started speaking French, which became our lingua franca.[16]

Thus, during the month of May 2005 it felt as if the Tower of Babel had taken up residence in my cranium. It was one month of scaling the unknown, whilst clutching onto the half-known and half-forgotten and hoping all along not to sound half-witted.

In the half-way house of understanding, I have become acutely aware of how language travels and I have become most intrigued by the elasticity of foreignness in its embodied form. In my own language travels I have been called a Greek in Australia as well as in Turkey. I have been identified as a Turk in Turkey as well as in France. I have been categorised as a native of Spain. I have been labelled a Malaysian in Indonesia and in Malaysia I have been labelled a Eurasian and sometimes even an Arab. I have been catalogued as an Australian in New Zealand but an Australian in Turkey wanted to know where I was *really* from.

The concept of provenance is indeed a conundrum to contemplate. How do any of us know where we are *really* from? Most oral histories and family records do not extend as far back as Adam and Eve. Origins shape the individual, but so do journeys. Foreign destinations entail linguistic adventures and these adventures can reconfigure our cosy pigeon-holes of identity: both of our own and of others.

Conclusion: 'Suk de portakale'

Reflecting upon personal experiences has generated practically my entire biography and, for this excess of self, I apologise. Apologies are also offered in case the mistaken impression was given that I have any talent in juggling tongues in my travelling circus of languages. The simple truth is that my account is biased: judiciously, all communicative failures have been excluded. Finally, I look forward to further language travels in Romania. This is my second trip here and, though

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I have no linguistic achievements to boast of, at least I can order orange juice with some confidence!

NOTES:

[1] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australian Government), retrieved 22 July 2007, http://www.dfat.gov.au/aib/society.html

[2] Group of Eight 2007, 'Languages in Crisis: A Rescue Plan for Australia', retrieved 23 August 2007, http://www.go8.edu.au/policy/papers/2007/Go8%20Languages%20in%20Crisis%20Discussion%20Paper.pdf With the change in federal government after the election of 24 November 2007, it will be interesting to see how these issues will be addressed.

[3] For a more complete discussion of the word 'Frank', see Williams, G. 1993, 'More replies on "FARANG" ("Westerner") and related terms', retrieved 29 July 2007, http://listserv.linguistlist.org/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9306C&L=linguist&P=4172

[4] Bellwood, P. 1991, 'The Austronesian Dispersal and the Origin of Languages', *Scientific American,* July, pp. 70-75.

[5] During question time, on this matter of national language labels, the analogy was drawn between Romania and Moldova.

[6] *International Conference on Empowerment of Museums,* Bali, Indonesia, 29 Nov. - 2 Dec. 1999

[7] Gordon, R.G. Jr., ed. 2005, *Ethnologue: Languages of the World,* 15th edn, Summer Institute of Languages, Dallas. Cf. online version, retrieved 29 June 2007, http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name+MY

[8] Many of the rankings rely on data from *Ethnologue* such as the three below:
http://www.vistawide.com/languages/top_30_languages.htm
http://www.photius.com/rankings/languages2.html
http://www.ling.gu.se/projekt/sprakfrageladan/english/index.html?page=fragebanken
http://www.cftech.com/BrainBank/COMMUNICATIONS/TopLanguages.html (data from *The Cambridge Factfinder*, Cambridge University Press, 1993)
http://www2.ignatius.edu/faculty/turner/languages.htm (provides three sources as a comparative frame)

[9] See note 2

[10] EUROPA, the portal site of the European Union <http://europa.eu> is a cornucopia of data. Information on language surveys in the EU, retrieved 25 July 2007, http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/languages/lang/europeanlanguages_en.html

[11] *The 11th International Oral History Conference*, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey, 15-19 June 2000

[12] Hughes, R. 1992, *Barcelona*, Harvill, London, p. 366.

[13] *The 9th Annual International Cultural Studies Symposium*, Ege University, Izmir, Turkey, 5-7 May 2004

[14] Co-authored with Cavide Atakan for *The 10th Annual International Cultural Studies Symposium*, Ege University, Izmir, Turkey, 4-6 May 2005

[15] 'Lexical Wanderlust: A Travelogue of Malay Words in English', the Faculty of Sciences and Letters, Petru Maior University, Târgu Mureş, Romania, 12 May 2005

[16] Sadly, we could not resume our lingua franca exchanges, for Mihai Apavaloaie passed away shortly before I arrived. All these words of reflection are dedicated to his memory and to the warmth of words.

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