That Which Is Casually Called a Language

ROBERT J. C. YOUNG

[C]e qu'on appelle tranquillement une langue.
—Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*

The Rev. Robert Caldwell (1814–91) used the term Dravidian . . . to designate, one might say invent, a new family of languages.
—Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A LANGUAGE OR, INDEED, A LITERATURE? How could what is called a language exist?

For some time now literary studies in the West have been trying to "to move outside the rubrics of nation, state, and national language" ("Features" 614). That cosmopolitan desire to challenge the political configurations of Western hegemony in the literary sphere prompts a question: How many other conceptual structures that we might still want to employ remain determined by, or intimately related to, those same formations that helped create nation, state, and national language? If we dismantle the traditional ways of thinking about literature that have been developed since the nineteenth century, can we be sure that associated elements—such as our ideas about language, language rights and identity, mother tongue, or translation—have escaped their embrace? Is it possible, in other words, to think about language, literature, and translation outside the clutches of nation, state, and national language, disregarding the historical relations among them and the history of the invention of languages? Can languages be disinvented?

Modern languages, especially those that are held to embody the nation in some form, did not evolve organically but were carefully forged into their current identities. Like states, languages do

ROBERT J. C. YOUNG is Julius Silver Professor of English and Comparative Literature at New York University and dean of arts and humanities at New York University Abu Dhabi. His most recent books are *Empire Colony Postcolony* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015) and, with Jean Khalfa, *Frantz Fanon: Écrits sur l'aliénation et la liberté, Œuvres II* (La Découverte, 2016).

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not simply exist as a fact of nature; they have to be created. European languages composed part of the social, cultural, and political machinery that enabled the development of the nation-state up to and beyond 1648 (Anderson; Dann; Hobsbawm 51–63; Hobsbawn and Ranger; Joseph, *Language*). Many languages outside Europe were crafted and classified according to the European model in the period of colonialism. Before colonization, suggests William Samarin, Africa was "a continent without languages" (qtd. in Makoni and Pennycook 14), which is not, of course, to imply that complex forms of speech and communication were not being practiced. It is rather that the idea of a language, and of languages in a sociocultural sense, is altogether a Western construction, part of the same process whereby Europeans produced indigenous law from custom, races and castes from ethnological or anthropological semiotics, or cultures from varieties of social institutions and human behavior (Cohn; Young, *Colonial Desire* and "Sir William Jones"). Common to all these creative taxonomies was the aspiration to codify in the written form of a European language the everyday experiences and practices of the people of other societies, as the European investigator chose to understand and represent them. Missionaries and colonial administrators sought to classify the multiplicity of tongues of their colonial subjects into specific named languages that could be then printed and codified in dictionaries and grammars, which would allow the Bible and other Western texts to be translated into these languages and then disseminated. Languages had to be fabricated so that translation could take place: both were instruments of colonial rule and power.

The distinct languages of Europe—and their avatars, the national literatures written in a single language—were formed by a variety of state interventions and institutional forces over hundreds of years, whereas in the twentieth century national languages were created almost instantly at will (e.g., Modern Turkish or Modern Hebrew). National languages are like amoebas that can be fused or divided according to need: while dialects are subsumed into the national language, other languages get split into two according to the demands of national politics—in 1947, for example, Hindustani was partitioned into Modern Standard Urdu and Modern Standard Hindi. Politics similarly separated Afrikaans and Flemish from Dutch, Norwegian from Danish, Serbian from Croatian. At the same time, many national languages operate as something of a legal fiction, such as Urdu in Pakistan (Rahman) or, despite its ancient origins in Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* (1302–05), Italian (Hall; Joseph, *Language* 98–102; Tamburelli).

It was not simply that particular languages were engineered, largely for political purposes, but that in order to represent the nation, the concept of a language had to be dreamt up as well. The idea of a language as a discrete entity was a concept devised by European philologists; it continues to be promulgated by linguists all over the world, though it is constantly challenged: Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook begin their collection *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages* (2007) with the premise, "*languages, conceptions of languageness* and the *metalanguages* used to describe them are inventions" (1). The construction of language as an autonomous, self-contained entity distinct from social relations was the contrivance of theorists of Western modernity such as John Locke in the seventeenth century (Bauman and Briggs 29–37). That no language actually exists empirically does not mean that people do not behave as if it does. A language is not a thing or an object (Sériot, *Langues*) but a conceptual construction about a form of human speech and writing. There is no more a language than there is a speech (other than the political or after-dinner variety) or a writing: there is only speech, writing, or language. The logical

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corollary of the invention of the idea of a language is the notion of monolingualism and, since monolingualism requires that languages be divided into singularities, also of bilingualism, multilingualism, code switching, and all the other terms developed to describe the fact that human beings do not speak a language. In seeking out and endorsing multilingualism today in an apparently progressive spirit, we continue to operate with, and thereby enforce, the very paradigm and assumption of monolingualism that some believe is contested by multilingualism. In promoting multilingualism, we are upholding and confirming monolingualism, the idea that people speak separate, classifiable, and classified single languages, each of which by definition is marked by a border that ensures unity, like the boundary of a nation. Like multilingualism, multiculturalism is the product of a rigidified thinking that unconsciously assumes borders among ethnicities, languages, and cultures. When politicians announce that multiculturalism has failed, they are doing nothing more than recognizing the inadequacy of their own political concept. In the same way, ethnicity as a form of identity politics finds itself bound to the nation-state, since ethnic identities typically operate only within its boundaries, even identities that are also diasporic. The nation-state works in exactly the same way as language—defining itself externally against other nation-states (other languages) and internally in its relation to subgroups of ethnicities (dialects of one language).

The nominalist monolingual model was conceived as part of the creation of national languages, which required, in order for them to come into being, the elimination or downgrading of all dialectal variations, subdialects, local vernaculars, and other discernibly different forms of speech. What had been deliberately produced and engineered was then naturalized into the idea that the different peoples of the world spoke distinct languages and that these languages could be classified, coded, and categorized into elaborate taxonomies, drawn up by the observing philologist or linguist from the West. World literature adopts this colonial model unconsciously, looking for literatures written in identifiable languages and then organizing each language and its literature in relation to nationality, region, or cultural origin: the literature and its language are then tacitly assumed to represent the people who are associated with them. In considering the idea of world literature, we need to reflect on the history of the construction of languages and to question any assumption of an intrinsic relation between languages and geographic location or ethnic, indigenous, or other identity. Notwithstanding the importance of developing indigenous perspectives, we need to be aware of the historical construction of indigeneity and indigenous identity by means of its languages and its cultures, in order to rethink our understanding of the historical relation among languages, literatures, and the cultural identity of those who create them (Thomas).

The result of the production of distinct languages and the repression of dialects—a consequence of European nationalism and colonialism, enforced by governmental mother-tongue education and vernacular literacy programs—is that today Africa has 2,138 "living languages," and Europe, including all of Russia, has 286 (*Summary*). If Europe is poor in languages, its languages also dominate the 7,746 languages of the world.[1] Rich or poor, the world's languages are countable, divisible. For *Glottolog*, the main criterion for classifying a potential language as a language is the following: "Is the putative language assertably distinct from all other known languages? For any alleged language to be considered in the classification we must first determine whether it was distinct from all other languages. By distinct, we mean *not mutually intelligible* with any other language. In principle, any convincing evidence to this effect is sufficient" (*About Languoids*).

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Defining the identity and difference of a language by its incomprehensibility vis-à-vis all other languages colludes with the ideology of monolingualism: that human beings carry only one language in their heads and that if they carry more than one, the languages remain entirely separate from one another, divided up in the brain like the division made by a national territorial border on a map.

According to this definition, Maghrebi Arabic would be a different language from that spoken in the Levant, even if both are forms of Arabic. When we look up Arabic in *Glottolog*, we find that it is classified as a subfamily of the family Afro-Asiatic. The subfamily Arabic occurs as part of a chain of higher-level subfamilies that include Semitic, Central Semitic, and Arabian. Arabic then has its own subfamilies: Arabian Peninsula Arabic, Eastern Arabic, Egyptic Arabic, Levantine Arabic, North African Arabic, Standard Arabic. Arabian Peninsula Arabic has eleven subfamilies, each of which is further divided. There seems no logical reason for this process to stop. A language, it turns out, consists of a continual process of division until the investigator becomes exhausted with classifying the ever more minor differences that must eventually terminate in individual speech patterns. Although all these forms of Arabic are Arabic, many of them fail the test of being mutually comprehensible, as indeed would many dialects in other languages. How do ordinary people nevertheless come to accept that they speak the same language as these incomprehensible others? Primarily because there is a standard written form to which their speech bears a nominal relation and that holds together the ever-changing diversity of speech in a Platonic mode: writing appears as the ideal form of changing, irregular speech, even if it too changes gradually from decade to decade. The assumed intrinsic connection between speech and writing promulgated by vernacular ideology paradoxically depends on a regularized idiom that enforces and seems to produce the boundaries of the language. But if writing is not simply a secondary representation of speech, as Derrida has argued, could it be simply another mode of the language? This possibility is more obvious in Arabic, where the verbal version of written Standard Arabic, Fusha, is also the spoken form utilized in official situations but survives as one version of Arabic only by being taught in schools. Even if Arabic does not quite conform to this definition, we may say that in general languages are privileged, regularized dialects and that all other forms of the language are then categorized as dialects. The often quoted quip "A language is a dialect with an army" suggests that a language is simply the dialect of the powerful who have appropriated the claim to the national in their own constructed version: languages are best understood not as the speech patterns of ordinary people but as institutions of political, often national power. They can, of course, also operate as potent forms of national resistance—for example, Bangla in East Pakistan, Catalan in Spain, and Tamil in Sri Lanka. But such forms of linguistic resistance will always constitute in turn more nationalisms.

Filial National Languages

Languages have been conceptualized according to two distinct and incompatible models: the filial model and the confused model. Language itself as a concept maintains an oppositional, antithetical stance to dialect: a language is typically a particular standardized form of a dialect; dialects are defined as all sharing common features, which are then judged to make them part of a larger entity that is given the name of the language to which they belong. Coming close to the circularity of a Russellian paradox, the whole is thus itself a part of the set that constitutes it. Languages exist in an antinomy to their dialects; the concept of language is inherently dialectical in a linguistic as well as a philo-

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sophical sense. The same word in its various forms is used in both disciplines; the etymology of *dialect*, according to the *OED*, is suitably enough drawn from "multiple origins. Partly a borrowing from French. Partly a borrowing from Latin." Traveling back from French to Latin to Greek, *dialect* through these languages has always meant a form or variety of speech peculiar to a specific region and, at the same time, dialogic speech involving the idea of conversation between people, debate, cross talk. Both aspects have always existed as part and parcel of the same fundamental concept. But if dialects make up language, what is the relation of a dialect to other dialects?

The Bible, which provides one of the earliest and most influential accounts of the origin of language and languages, articulated the dialectic in the concept of language by offering two accounts of language and the relation of one language to another. The first presupposes language as a discrete, unified entity, which in turn presumes another language, just as any border will always mark an inside and an outside. The other questions the concept of separate languages with hard-and-fast boundaries and suggests something more like language as a continuum of dialects, each merging into the other. The first account, the dominant one, sustains the modern myth that has been so widely accepted. The second undercuts the myth and as a result exists as a dissident countertradition in philology and linguistics.

The first biblical story involves Noah's sons. Genesis 10 offers the concept of a fundamental coeval relation between a nation (not, of course, at this point a nation-state) and its language. The separation of humankind into distinct nations and languages is described through the lists of the generations of the sons of Shem after the flood: "By these were the isles of the Gentiles divided in their lands; every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations" (Gen. 10.5). The genealogy that follows elaborates the beginnings of ethnos, that is, the community of the nation or race that develops autonomously in the shell of its particular language into its distinct identity. When in the next chapter God says, "Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language" (11.6), we find the first formulation of the idea that, for a people to be one and to be powerful, they should all speak the same language. The nation is the metonymic recreation of the original unity of humankind—hence the drive for its people to speak a single language that will generate a common cultural identity. This narrative provided the inspiration for Herder's proposal that a national culture should be fashioned for those who speak the same language and share the same history (Barnard; Bauman and Briggs 163–96). But what defines the same language? The language that could define the nation had to be created: the New High German that was being developed in Herder's day was a case in point (Salmons 285–341; Sander 117–56).

Genesis 10 identifies particular languages, for which the King James Version uses the word "tongue," which emphasizes the spoken over any written or standardized form, with their transmission through a family tree:

> 5 By these were the isles of the Gentiles divided in their lands; every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> 31 These are the sons of Shem, after their families, after their tongues, in their lands, after their nations.

Each grandson of Noah has his own family, his own tongue, his own land, his own nation. Their languages descend with the family and are part of the same genealogy. In the nineteenth century, following the work of William Jones and others, historical philologists used this model to develop the comparative study of languages. The idea that languages diversify internally from a single source enabled the classification of them as belonging to families, their descent from and relation

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to other languages discernible according to the chart of a linguistic family tree. In 1853, August Schleicher sketched his *stammbaum* ("family tree") theory, which assumes that languages are distinct and divide into ever more differentiated forms.[2] Because each language evolves like a species, language overall can progress from a primitive to a developed state; or, like an organism, each language moves through periods of growth, maturity, and old age, while at the same time spawning new languages to replace it and continue the natural cycle. The form of this spawning implies that languages reproduce asexually, not by cross-fertilizing with another language but by dividing their own cells. Today we might say that the DNA of the parent language is thus completely preserved in the child language. Such comparative or historical philology was developed from the study of written and allegedly dead languages (especially Latin and Sanskrit),[3] which supported the assumption of the separateness of languages. The tree model ignores the possibility of any relation or contact between languages except with respect to their comparative places in the vertical genealogy of the family.

This theory of language conveniently corresponded to the ideology of the nation-state, its mother tongue, and the identification of spoken language with written (Yildiz). For much of the nineteenth century, race was thrown into the mix as well: philology and ethnology, language and race, were seamlessly combined on the model of Noah and his sons. In the different language families, loosely connected to races, the modern descendants were identified with individual nations. The separation of languages into distinct units whose affiliations operated in a vertical linear structure emphasized common lineage and suggested that each nation, with its own mother tongue, was like an individual in a family tree, a discrete and autonomous body. The two meanings of *race*—the older one of the genealogy of an individual family ("the last of his race") and the more recent one of human beings classified according to shared physical and cultural characteristics—were fused. This first model, though with certain significant modifications such as the separation of language from race, endures: languages are still conceptualized as sovereign, discrete entities.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, with the interventions of Ferdinand de Saussure and others, historical philology gave way to linguistics, which abandoned history and interlanguage comparison for the structural analysis of language as a system. Despite the radical change of method, one assumption went unchallenged and indeed was strengthened in this change: the idea of a language as a self-regulating system meant that it needed to work within determined limits. Establishing the borders of a language, however, was not easy. Defining a boundary is itself, as Étienne Balibar has pointed out, something of a paradoxical exercise in circularity. The unity of a language, Naoki Sakai suggests, is at most a Kantian regulative idea: "It organizes knowledge but it is not empirically verifiable" (73). For Saussure the invention of linguistics required the theorization of language as a self-contained system without any reference to its history, political or social function, or practice. The crux in his *Course in General Linguistics* comes when his attempt to define language in purely linguistic terms falters as he seeks to find a concept that will hold a language together without the need to invoke extralinguistic factors. Saussure characterizes the principle of unity as a "social bond" (13), but he can define what this bond is only by inventing a nonce word for it, *éthnisme* ("ethnic unity" [223])—which takes him back to the realm of race that he was trying to avoid.[4] To delineate the borders of a language, he must invoke a concept that is not there in his own language but literally made up. Languages are borderless.

Linguists today are divided on the issue of intermediary forms that are obviously the

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product of language crossings, such as lingua francas and creoles: some linguists consider that these forms do not constitute proper languages; others consider that all languages are creole (Makoni and Pennycook 21; Romaine). Language crossing, improper though it may be, represents the other, antithetical, confounded model of language.

Confounded Language

The narrative of the relation between language and nation given in Genesis 10 is at odds with the story told in Genesis 11, the chapter in which we encounter the most famous myth in Western culture about the origin of the world's many languages. The story of Babel is recorded in many other texts from the Mediterranean ancient world, though not in the Qur'an, doubtless because the Qur'an emphasizes the unity of humankind rather than its genealogical differences and because it is God who teaches Adam the name of things. The biblical account evokes the moment when human beings spoke a single, universal, Adamic language—"the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech" (1)—but were forced by God into speaking, according to tradition, seventy-two languages, proliferating to the thousands of languages that exist today on earth. With Babel, God confounded human speech, and the result was the dispersal of languages and of people all over the earth. Diaspora and the multiplicity of languages thus occurred simultaneously and were the product of the same divine intervention: "Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth" (9).

In assembling our account of literature in a multilingual world, perhaps to give a better picture of world literature in terms of the diversity of its languages outside the realm of nation, state, and national languages, we seek to reassemble and decipher the totality of the speech that was confused at Babel, to rejoin the fragments of the original broken vessel. The project of world literature returns to its early-nineteenth-century beginnings and becomes a new version of the eighteenth century's quest to restore the universal language of humankind. If we are to reestablish that universal language, we must invoke translation in order to do so and "detranslate" language back to its original. But can we do so "outside the rubrics of nation, state, and national language"?

As the story is told, the universal language was not exactly transformed into many languages at Babel. According to the biblical (King James) account of the fall of language, the original language was broken up and mixed together so that the words could no longer be distinguished; they were confused (*confound* in English is an earlier form of *confused*). Separate words could no longer be recognized in speech, like writing that has no spaces between the words, like sound that is incoherent because it is continuous. "Babel" names this babbling confusion, which is how James Joyce graphically reenacts the fall of language at the beginning of *Finnegans Wake*:

> The fall (bababadalgharaghtakamminarronnkonnbronntonnerronntuonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohoohoordenenthurnuk!) (3)

The dispersal of human languages is also often represented as a story of the origins of cultural difference and of the beginning of the necessity of translation. As the title of George Steiner's classic account of the history and theory of translation, *After Babel*, suggests, it is generally assumed that the diversity of languages that God effected in turn required translation, but there is no actual mention of translation in the biblical version of the story of Babel. Babel names God's intervention that changes human speech: "Let us go down, and there confound their language" (Gen. 11.7).[5] The one language was thrown into disorder,

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mixed up or mingled "so that it becomes impossible or difficult to distinguish the elements," as the *OED* puts it ("Confound," def. 6). God's confounding of language suggests the necessity not of translation but of a kind of deciphering, of sorting or distinguishing the confused elements of language so that they can be understood again. If everyone is now speaking different confusions of the same original language, then the act of understanding the speech of one by another requires not the untangling of the mixture back to that original, which is now lost forever, but the rearranging of the different combination of elements understood by the other person. The Babel story does not mention a multiplicity of new languages; it says only that the original language was confused so that people could no longer understand one another. The one language has now been rearranged into many different combinations. In telling the story in this way, the biblical narrative avoids a major theoretical question. It is relatively easy to conceptualize a language if there is only one, since its boundaries are then the boundaries of language itself (though even here we might want to distinguish language from sign), but it is difficult to say exactly how Babel produced coherent languages distinct from one another since the whole point of the story is that they became confused. Babel therefore offers a theory of linguistic multiplicity in which languages are involved with one another, part of one another, not essentially separate. Although there are many representations of language difference, historically such representation has focused on barbarians, that is, those whose speech is altogether unintelligible. There are people whose words can be understood perfectly; people whose words can be interpreted and understood in some fashion, either through adjustment for dialectal variation or through the use of a lingua franca such as Koine Greek; and people whose speech is impossible to understand. Translation, which requires recognizably separate languages, does not enter into the picture.

In the Genesis 11 model, the diversity of languages is not a matter for tables of genealogical descent but a jumble of interrelated tongues that differ from one another only by degree. The first model, from Genesis 10, is vertical; the second, from Genesis 11, is horizontal. The vertical model stresses the filial genealogy of languages, where influence is only derived from the past; the horizontal model emphasizes the existence of different living languages jostling together in proximate space. Whereas the vertical model connects to the dominant *Stammbaum* theory of language, the horizontal model links up with the alternative tradition of historical philology and linguistics that conceives of language through forms of confusion and crossing, a spatial, geographic model that draws on language areas where nation-states have not formed, where individually definable languages scarcely exist—for example, Eastern Europe, the Pamir Mountains, the Caucasus Mountains, Nagaland in northeast India. The idea of language contact and merger, of the development of common features as a result of contact, was already explored in the nineteenth century by Hugo Schuchardt (1842–1927), the first linguist to propose that creoles were proper languages, and Johannes Schmidt (1843–1901). Schuchardt and Schmidt were the foremost proponents of the wave theory (*Wellentheorie*) of language, according to which linguistic innovations spread out concentrically to the languages around them (François).

In the twentieth century, Russian and, later, Soviet linguists attacked the imperialism of European historical philology, whose concepts, they believed, did not work for Slavic languages; they developed instead ideas about language that emphasized not discrete units but convergence and hybridity. In 1923 Nikolai Trubetzkoy proposed the idea of the *Sprachbund* ("linguistic alliance" or "lan-

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guage union"), as a model opposing the implicitly biological basis of the *Sprachfamilie* ("language family") and *Stammbaumtheorie*. In his essay "The Tower of Babel and the Confusion of Tongues," he writes of how relations of similarity and contiguity—to use Jakobsonian terminology—of genetic and nongenetic groupings, make up the totality of language unions. Since there are no borders to language, all languages are *Ausbau* languages, existing in an interrelated continuum:

> [A]ll the languages of the world form an uninterrupted network whose links merge into one another—something like a rainbow. Because this rainbow-like network is continuous and transitions within it are gradual, the overall system of the languages of the world, for all its motley variety, constitutes a whole, obvious though it may be only to a scholar. (155)

This model allows Trubetzkoy to deny nationalist identifications with languages on the European model. The *Sprachbund* is a nonnational, nonracial union that operates across language borders. His language union marks a functioning, idiosyncratic whole that is continually reacting and interacting, colliding and combining with other systems in its zone, compounding "the processes of divergence (the breakdown of a language into dialects) and convergence (the rapprochement of languages in contact)" in a dialectical movement of centripetal and centrifugal forces that anticipates Mikhail Bakhtin (Gasparov 57). Bakhtin's concept of hybridity was developed in the context of the ideas of the dominant Soviet linguist of the interwar period, Nikolai Marr (1865–1934), whose work, although dismissed by almost all linguists (and even, belatedly, by his principal patron, Joseph Stalin), has in recent years been the subject of significant reconsideration by Patrick Sériot (*Paradigme*) and seems also to have influenced Gilles Deleuze's model of proximity, of language as a rhizomatic form without boundaries (Deleuze and Guattari).

In formulating their theories of language mixture, the Russian linguists were indebted to the work of Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929), a Polish linguist who taught in Russia for much of his career (Adamska-Salaciak). Baudouin de Courtenay challenged not just the tree and the wave models but the very constitution of languages as discrete conceptual entities. Following Schuchardt, he argued for the mixed character of all languages but went further, attacking the classificatory system of languages on which linguistics was founded. In his essay "Towards a Critique of Artificial World Languages" (1907), he writes:

> [Karl] Brugmann [a German neogrammarian and follower of Schleicher] is mistaken when he maintains that "French, like every living language, has a homeland." A collective "language" does not have a "homeland" in the sense that Brugmann has in mind. Individual language may indeed have a "homeland" in the mind of its bearer, that is, the speaker of the language. And if several languages coexist in the same mind, then they have a common "homeland," without persecuting and dislodging each other. (Stankiewicz 255)

Even a dead language, he continues, may have a homeland in which it lives with others in the mind of an individual. Different languages coexist just as different practices of speaking subsist side by side: "Does man exist for language or language for man? *Language is neither a self-contained organism nor an untouchable fetish, it is a tool and an activity*" (255–56). In "The Classification of Languages" (1910), Baudouin de Courtenay argues for the importance of

> the uninterrupted *interpenetration and mixture of linguistic thought* of various, including individual, languages. This mixture is, on the one hand, a consequence of linguistic intercourse in general and, on the other hand, of the fact that the human brain is capable of combining linguistic thought of more than one language, or more simply speaking, of

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> mastering more than one language.
> (Stankiewicz 258–59)

Language, he argues, is better thought of as an activity or instrument of communication. Human beings do not translate between languages as they speak but modulate the linguistic medium according to whom they are addressing. If translation presupposes the discrete model of family trees, it cannot deal with the other, simultaneous aspect of language: dialect, dialectics, and mixture. Translation in its conventional conception can operate successfully in contexts where distinct, usually written, languages have been established but not in situations where there is a multiplicity of different languages that merge seamlessly across a language zone in many forms and varieties. This problem is rarely discussed in translation studies.

Grierson

The *Linguistic Survey of India* carried out by G. A. Grierson provides a compelling example of the process whereby a Western philologist, charged as a civil servant to survey the languages of a colony, travels to a distant country to isolate and classify them. Grierson believes in the principles by which he is conducting the survey even as he articulates his awareness that they are being forcibly imposed on a practice where no such pattern is discernible. Much of his introduction to the *Survey* is taken up by a review of the previous scholarship by foreigners, non-Indians, over the previous three hundred years. He is apparently assuming, without comment, that either there is no indigenous scholarship, or, if there is, it is not worth reviewing. In his essay "Languages," written for the 1909 edition of the *Indian Empire Gazetteer*, he points to a fundamental conceptual absence:

> All this is a subject about which natives of India, a land whose literary glory may almost be said to be founded on the labours of its indigenous grammarians, are curiously incurious. Few natives at the present day are able to comprehend the idea connoted by the words "a language." Dialects they know and understand. They separate them and distinguish them with a meticulous, hair-splitting subtlety, which to us seems unnecessary and absurd; but their minds are not trained to grasp the conception, so familiar to us, of a general term embracing a number of interconnected dialects. It is as if we, in England, spoke of "Somersetshire" and "Yorkshire" dialects, but never used the term "English language." It thus follows that, while the dialect-names in the following pages have been taken from the indigenous nomenclature, nearly all the language-names have had to be invented by Europeans. (350)

The crux of his remarks comes in the sentence "Few natives at the present day are able to comprehend the idea connoted by the words 'a language.'" This division between native names for dialects and European names for languages obtained not only in India but also in Africa and elsewhere. It is extraordinary that in the later twentieth century in the Indian subcontinent, many people were prepared to die for their ethnic and national identifications with language (Das Gupta), yet in 1909 few Indians, Grierson claims, understood the concept. Perhaps the natives were more intelligent than Grierson realized; perhaps their "hair-splitting subtlety" was no more absurd than the philologist's generalizations. Grierson's "language" called something into being that had not hitherto existed: a metaconcept invented and imposed by the colonial linguistic anthropologist for the benefit of his metropolitan masters.

Remarkably, however, later on in "Languages" Grierson appears to agree with the native view that there are in fact no languages, only dialects merging into one another:

> This *l*-participle, therefore, not only covers the whole of Aryan East India, but reaches, through an almost unbroken chain of dia-

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> lects all imperceptibly shading off into each other, to the Arabian Sea. This illustrates the intimate relationship which exists among all these forms of speech; and although Assamese is widely different from Marathi, and although a speaker of the one would be entirely unintelligible to a speaker of the other, a man could almost walk for 1,500 miles, from Dibrugarh to Goa, without being able to point (except, perhaps, in Bastar) to a single stage where he had passed from one language to another. (373)

So Grierson affirms *avant la lettre* Trubetzkoy's *Sprachbund* at the very moment when he is engaged in classifying the imperceptibly changing Indian dialects into distinct languages—languages that would become so definably distinct that in 1950 they would be reduced to fourteen official scheduled languages of the new Indian constitution,[6] while in 1956 the states of India would be reorganized to match them. This classifying was at times something of a tautology, given that, as Grierson himself notes, the same language was given different names—Assamese and Bengali, for example—not for linguistic reasons but because of what he calls nationality. Official interventions notwithstanding, even today it is possible to encounter what Grierson calls "the little hole-in-the-corner forms of speech" about which no one knows anything (*Linguistic Survey* 18).

What Grierson encountered with respect to dialects is still observable: there are not so much different languages as endless variations and differences. Take the case of the complex web of speech-forms spoken at the borders of Rajasthan and Gujarat, around Banni and the Rann of Kutch, where different languages, such as Kutchi, Gujarati, Rajastani, and Sindhi, are variously treated as if they were the same or different according to regional and political preferences (Kothari, *Memories* 9–16 and "Names"). Although there is an official list of specific languages in this region, people do not think of themselves as speaking different languages when they shift linguistic registers. As Rita Kothari observes, "The same region, text, person has multiple languages without [their] being thought of as 'different' languages and always requiring an act of translation. . . . This means that languages in India are not spatially arranged isomorphs but sites constituted through diversity and pluralism" ("Names" 111).

Since Grierson's survey, the Indian government has twice commissioned an update, but the cataloging has never been completed. Grierson, although he did not survey the whole of India, in the end found 188 languages and 544 dialects. In 2010, Ganesh Devy began to publish a *People's Linguistic Survey of India*, which has found many more languages, around 780. Yet the problem is that the survey, however more refined its methodology and means of operation, operates on the same assumption, namely, that there are distinct languages, each with its subsidiary dialects.

Translation

What if our modern ideas of language were invented expressly so that there could be translation? What if the whole point of translation is to keep languages apart? Not to carry meaning across languages but to confirm the presumption of the division between them? What if translation required the invention of the monolingual (and then the multilingual) for it to come into existence? The modern—that is to say, modern European—idea of translation was created alongside language identities and differences, while the various European words for translation emerged around the same time as the idea of a language. Translation works very well with the idea of a language or, rather, two languages (by definition, translation must be monolingual and multilingual at once), except that it is based on the fiction that languages are coherent, discrete entities, that you can separate them into source and target. But the question of how and why speech or even

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writing becomes a wholly distinct language remains unanswered.

Grierson collected examples of different languages to obtain a translation of the Parable of the Sower. He used a specially written version that contained a complete set of basic grammatical functions, tenses, and so forth to allow for a comparison between dialects that would enable him to call them languages. Since most speakers of the many dialects in British India did not speak English, he circulated a small book with translations of the parable into sixty-five different Indian languages and dialects. This exercise required the speakers to be bilingual, which suggests a model of language competency different from that of the singularity of languages that he was trying to establish. Predictably, many natives did not know all the groups of these sixty-five that they needed to, with the result that sometimes the translations that came back had been relayed through as many as five languages. That the work of classifying languages required the work of translation illustrates how the creation of languages and translation are part and parcel of the same conceptual schema: each produces and requires the other. Once the idea of discrete languages was developed, the practice of translation had to be introduced in order to facilitate mutual comprehension. Translation provides a bridge between languages and at the same time holds them apart. By contrast, the word in Sanskrit for translation, remarks Harish Trivedi, *annuvad,* means "saying after or again, repeating by way of explanation. . . . The underlying metaphor in the word *annuvad* is temporal—to say *after*, to repeat—rather than spatial as in the English/Latin word translation" (Bassnett and Trivedi 9).[7] Translation, in its Western sense, Trivedi points out, was in part the product of the development of the idea of writing as a form of property. Until the invention of copyright, anyone could repeat or adapt another work, and there was no need to attend scrupulously to the letter. Retelling in the same or another language—did it make a difference?

Translation requires that a tongue has been transformed into a determinate written language; therefore translation can take place only between tongues that have themselves already been translated into the form of a regulated language. Translation can occur only if both languages have been made proper, have been standardized. Wedded to the written form, translation is sustained by the ideology of discrete unitary languages, assuming and requiring monolingualism, for without that separated distinction the conversion of one language into another would never take place—and would never be needed. The dependence of translation on monolingualism and on the progenitors of monolingualism, nationalism and the state, is unavoidable.

Grierson's construction of Indian languages as discrete units through the act of translation helps us respond to the question, "What is the role of translation in the circulation of literary cultures in different periods and places?" ("Features" 615). The answer is that translation was the crystallization of languages as part of the institutional apparatus of the state, and the creation of other languages on the same conceptual model, that enabled languages to become distinct and fixed enough for translation to take place. Translation is dependent on the spoken tongue's being "reduced to writing," as Grierson puts it ("Languages" 356): a stabilized, written form that allows the distinction between source and target. If we try to think of language and literature outside the triad of nation, state, and language, translation becomes problematic, because it requires the linguistic models that the triad invented. Equally problematic, as Makoni and Pennycook observe, is the stress on the use of vernacular languages as opposed to imposed colonial ones, for the written forms that enabled the creation and classification of those vernacular languages were themselves likely the construction of a missionary

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or colonial officer, while the identification with them assumed a Herderian continuity among language, ethnicity, and geographic location and a suture between mother tongue vernacular and writing (24). By pursuing writing in many languages or local vernaculars, by moving from the monolingual to the multilingual, we are not escaping the politics and history of the national construction of languages but staying in exactly the same place, in the prison house of a language.

How does translation work in multilingual environments where the individual languages concerned may not even be classified as languages? It may not be necessary because translation becomes the endemic state of communication, of language itself. In his influential essay *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (*Monolingualism of the Other*), Derrida argues that in practice even the monolingual does not describe a single language (the word *multilingualism* is therefore entirely absent from his text). His paradox, that we only ever speak one language and we never speak only one language, amounts, he argues, to the law of "ce qu'on appelle la traduction" (25; "what we call translation"; my trans.). What does he mean by this? His paradoxical antimony suggests that translation is intrinsic to the use of language, as we move between different registers in order to communicate and make ourselves comprehensible. That no language is bounded or contained, that all languages, perhaps even *Abstand* language isolates, despite their separation merge into one another as human beings use them—in practice, not in the way that they are theorized. At the same time, we speak only one language because no two languages are exact equivalents of each other, because all languages constitute a continuum of difference. The multiplicity of languages is evident in the existence of synonyms. The biblical phrase "every one after his tongue" indicates the different words used for language in the English of that period: *tongue*, *speech*, *language*, words whose differences are echoed and amplified in the European languages of today—a confusion of terms that makes much theoretical discourse about language (e.g., Saussure's *langue/langage/parole* or Heidegger's "Die Sprache spricht") almost impossible to translate into English (Cassin 675–84). The languages of Europe appear to be elided and confused with one another, not untranslatable but, as Walter Benjamin puts it, translatable only "bis zu einem gewissen Grade" (10; "to a certain degree"; my trans.). The differences even among standardized languages involve uncertain variations of measure, modes of intention, and manners of meaning.

Finally, in our study of literary expression in minor or regional languages, let us not forget minoritized groups who choose to work with standard languages by breaking them. Let us not forget immigrants in France, like Derrida (79) or Frantz Fanon (33–52), who wish to utilize the resources of a perfect French, or those Dalits in India who write in English because it offers them the freedom of a casteless language, an escape from the oppression that Hindi and other Indian languages exert through their everyday linguistic textures (Kothari, "Caste"). Language, like literature, finds different ways of being in the world.

Notes

1. This total comes from *Glottolog* (*About Languoids*); *Ethnologue* gives 7,097 (*Summary*). These numbers change almost daily; figures here are taken from sites accessed 12 December 2015.

2. Schleicher originally drew the figure of a naturalistic tree growing up into the sky. After the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* six years later, the tree was turned upside down to emphasize descent. See Richards.

3. By the nineteenth century both Latin and Sanskrit were mainly utilized in the written form, even if linguists continue to debate whether Sanskrit or indeed Latin is dead.

4. The equating of language and race was the position argued by his colonialist brother Léopold (see Joseph, *Saussure* 441–45; Young, "Race" 67). Many linguists have challenged Saussure's claim of the autonomy of the linguistic system, among them Voloshinov and Harris.

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5. The *OED* cites this quotation as an example of sense 5 of *confound*: "To throw (things) into confusion or disorder." This sense, it adds, is cognate with sense 3 of *confuse*, which since the nineteenth century has become the more common word to employ: "To throw into disorder or confusion; to disorder."

6. The number of official languages in India has now increased to twenty-two. On language and the formation of identities in India, see Kaviraj.

7. Although the English word *translation* has a Latin root, the Romans used *translatio* not in the modern metaphoric usage of linguistic translation but in its literal meaning of transfer, or handing over.

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