

Richard Stephen Chapman

# Sustaining Languages and the Language of Sustainability

## The Need for Change

### Abstract

*This paper attempts to tackle a number of connected philosophical questions regarding the role of language in the debate surrounding sustainability. One of the most obvious effects of globalisation and our current ecological crisis is the disappearance of languages and the impoverishment of our linguistic resources. The paper initially contrasts the experience and nature of biological and linguistic extinction in order to better understand the effects of language death on sustainability. The paper then moves to examining the disempowering effects of predominant discourses and truncated repertoires in what is largely monolingual behaviour, with particular reference to current crises and attempts to alleviate them. Language teaching and practices are considered with a focus on the opposition of neoliberal globalising tendencies and policy on the one hand, and the actuality of the complexities of localised understanding on the other. It is suggested that sustainable policy and practice require sustainable linguistic means and uses, and will be informed by deeper, more detailed debate, rather than searching for sweeping solutions. The paper proposes a renewed approach to language policies regarding learning, teaching, testing and governance that are non-exploitative but, at the same time, respect the requirements of meritocratic values. The importance of receptive skills in (inter-)cultural interactions and the role of languages in the appreciation of truth values is also underlined.*

**Keywords:** *discourse, sustainability, monolingualism, plurilingualism, complexity*

*Speech [...] is the very object of man's conflicts.*

(Michel Foucault, *The Discourse on Language*)

There is intense debate about urgent threats to our future on this planet and the possibility of achieving a sustainable existence here. However, this paper attempts to underline how inadequate the very tools of discussion and analysis of climate change and other crises are becoming, and how serious a threat this poses to the whole sustainability project. In an epoch of tweets, soundbites and expertly-crafted commercial communication, everything seems to

vitiate against detailed and balanced argument, and this situation is exacerbated by the proliferation of fake news, which undermines the precepts of both scientific exploration and democratic governance. However, this paper suggests that the scenario is actually more serious and the risks more grave. The basis of linguistic behaviour and practice is compromised by events associated with the preeminence of neo-liberal thought and the forces of globalisation. We are experiencing an ecological and a psychological crisis (the urgency of which is met most often by panic, resignation or denial), but there is a complex language-ecological crisis underway as well. We are at risk of losing the means to explain, think about, or even describe the events of the very near future, let alone agree on real processes going towards attenuating or resolving them. This paper will attempt to assess and explain this crisis of language, firstly outlining its character and then delving into the invariably underestimated linguistic complexities involved. Reflections on the effects of a largely monolingual experience of our current situation are presented, along with a limited number of suggestive examples. Finally, the author proposes a view of what constitutes sustainable linguistic behaviour, indicating how it might be encouraged and the benefits it might have to offer.

### 1. The nature of the crisis

The climate crisis is accompanied by a *language crisis* that is more difficult to measure or evaluate, but which might actually prevent significant change in economic and social practices and thus hasten catastrophe.<sup>1</sup> There are many interlocking facets to this situation. Firstly, the language used in the vast majority of climate change debate is English (witness, for example, the skilful use of the language made by Greta Thunberg: it is difficult to envisage a campaigner like her having such a worldwide impact communicating mostly in Swedish). Since the Second World War, English has established itself as the preeminent language of science:<sup>2</sup> “for the natural sciences, medicine, and large areas of engineering, English utterly dominates in international communication”; “science [...] has a global tongue” (Montgomery 2013, 3). It is therefore hardly surprising to find English is the lingua franca of the climate debate and we must recognise that it allows speedy dissemination of ideas and data, and encourages contributions from widely different geographical and political-economic realities. But it remains

---

<sup>1</sup> See Crystal (1997) for a clear description of the current threat to languages. De Swaan (2013) describes many of the processes and issues of language change with clarity and authority. The relationship of language study and the ecological crisis is analysed in Stibbe (2013).

<sup>2</sup> The reversal of fortune for languages of science is striking: around 1900 more papers were published in German than English; in the 1950s English made up half of all publications, and by the 1980s constituted 80 per cent. Figures are quoted in Montgomery (2013).

true that the language of a great deal of climate discourse is English, and this leads us to question just how broad the debate really can be, to ask what we might be missing with an essentially monolingual approach, and what influence this language bias has. This is all the more true if we reflect on the fact that “the greater part of humanity does not speak or study English” (Montgomery 2013, 26). English is undoubtedly spoken and studied worldwide, and the trend in the last ten years shows little signs of this changing, but it is worth bearing in mind that in areas under significant ecological threat it is less than universally accessible. We shall also need to consider any costs that this predominance might imply: the most obvious of these being the elimination of entire languages and so the loss of cultural diversity. Put simply, do we really believe we can maintain a meaningful, informed debate about intensely difficult (and deadly) crises with a limited worldview and somewhat narrow channels of communication? Or do we risk attempting to solve highly complex problems, involving various inter-related complex systems, with a highly monolithic approach?

### ***1.1 Complexities***

Our attempt to analyse this crisis of language as the basis of scientific and political engagement on climate is faced with the somewhat underestimated problem of complexity.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to asking questions about language on a global scale, the data we have are wildly approximate, yet quoted with such repetition as to gain a deceptive patina of veracity. We can find the figure of nine languages a year ceasing to be spoken<sup>4</sup> or the more commonly quoted ‘one every two weeks’<sup>5</sup> as an estimate of language death (perhaps the most apparent and emotive linguistic issue for obvious reasons), but this really is a rough estimate (26 a year), and begs the question as to whether we are talking about a vector which is a constant (most unlikely) or if there is an acceleration (more likely perhaps, and devastating, if true). The causes and processes of assimilation are well established (De Swaan 2013; Ostler 2010, 174-175), and we can observe the stages of increasing pressure on a language, a period of unstable bilingual cohabitation and finally a generational change as younger speakers deem a tongue of little use and certainly an economic disadvantage. Ostler tells us that language death is a constant in history and not

---

<sup>3</sup> There are works on complexity and the use of English, for example, Baker (2015). But the problem of counting and assessing language practices is still challenging.

<sup>4</sup> This figure comes from The Language Conservancy website (TLC), <https://languageconservancy.org/language-loss/>. Last visited 30/01/2022.

<sup>5</sup> This is the most widely-used estimate and can be found in many publications, and on the University of Houston website, Engines of Our Ingenuity, <https://www.uh.edu/engines/epi2723.htm>. Last visited 30/01/2022. Perhaps more meaningful is their suggestion that “at least half of the world’s languages will become extinct in the next hundred years.”

uncommon, and stresses the highly pragmatic nature of choices as to which language we speak or learn (Ostler 2005, especially chapter 14). Our understanding of this process is dependent upon metaphors from ecology ('death' or 'extinction'), and this is reasonable in the attempt to describe a highly abstract event, but it can be problematical due to real differences, firstly of scale (there are 'only' around 6,000-7,000 languages to be lost—a strictly finite number), and secondly of quality. When the last exemplar of a species dies we lose that single species (certainly with potentially serious knock-on effects), but when we lose a language or dialect we lose an entire description of the universe—modes of interaction, categorisations of the world, nominalisations of social realities, ways of thinking and interpreting, patterns of discourse (Ostler 2010; 2005). The loss of a species impoverishes the planet, but the loss of a language impoverishes the way we perceive the planet, interact with it and with each other, and compromises the way we construct understanding and knowledge.<sup>6</sup> There is justly great urgency to protect endangered species, but survival is not enough for endangered languages: a tongue has to live well, neither forgotten nor disempowered (Crystal 1997).

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this to the climate debate, and to sustainability more generally: the connection between detailed scientific investigation and understanding with localised agricultural and social practices is vital, but becomes largely unattainable if there is inadequate understanding of specific realities and customary appreciation of the natural context in each place. The alternative is hugely inappropriate, ostensibly climate-science-based interventions, often with harsh consequences (Monbiot 2022)

Languages are dying at a pace we might find hard to measure, but our understanding of the global role of English is barely more accurate. Global linguistics has a problem with numbers: they are invariably imprecise (which is understandable) but used to support significant argument. We might even suggest that we know little about what people are really doing with English, and what we do know is usually rather out of date: in 2010 around 1.5-1.6 billion people were using English at least at a basic level (Montgomery 2013), but definitions are woolly and when examined numbers reveal themselves to be, at the very best, estimates. Ethnologue (2009)<sup>7</sup> is in general agreement, but when the number of people using English 'competently' in India is given as between 55-350 million, we can see just how uninformed we are. Estimates as

---

<sup>6</sup> De Swaan (2013) explains the processes involved well, and also describes the conceptualisation of languages as 'hypercollective goods,' stressing both their collective benefits and the external networking effects they engender.

<sup>7</sup> These figures are admittedly rather old, but have changed little over the intervening years, with 1.5 billion still being the estimate for English speakers and users in 2022. See <https://www.ethnologue.com/guides/most-spoken-languages>. Last visited 04/08/2022.

to other languages used in India reach as many as 1,652 (1961 census) or 447 (Ethnologue 2009): again we see a complexity that at one and the same time defies our current linguistic knowledge and challenges the hope that we can struggle for sustainability in a truly meaningful way in a country of such cultural variety.

We can even question the wisdom of the very basis of these estimates, useful as they may be. When we attempt to calculate the relative importance, power or influence of languages, using the yardstick of speaker-numbers, we commit to a pair of fallacies currently bedeviling linguistics. Firstly, there is an assumption of homogeneity: there are no truly national languages in that there is no direct fit between political borders and linguistic practice, but our figures for speakers are strongly dependent upon census data and populations of states (Montgomery 2013, 27). Secondly, these estimates completely airbrush away the complex reality of language behaviour (e.g. widely varying ability—what is a ‘competent’ user, and how are they defined?), the pragmatic choices made, and most of all the differences in dialects (it is notoriously hard to draw the line between one language and another). While some kind of counting is necessary, our figures should always be taken with caution (Montgomery 2013, Chapter 2). We might even suggest that the assumption of a single language called ‘English’ being spoken by Americans, Britons and Indians covers a multitude of varieties and interpretations.

The inaccuracy in these calculations may be less serious a problem than it seems at first sight, however, because the whole modernist enterprise of viewing languages through a lens of nationalist descriptors is a poor means of assessing actual language use. *Repertoires* are far more important than languages—socially, politically and scientifically (Blommaert 2010; 2005). These are what define a person’s ability to participate in debate, or protest or resist. The repertoires we have available to us define power and powerlessness in communicative situations, be they interviews, court trials, immigration hearings (Blommaert 2005) or simply when we perform our identities.<sup>8</sup> This complexity is underlined by Pennycook: “language practices are thus always social, historical and located” (2010, 140) and “the need for an understanding of language as a local practice as always requiring political, historical, epistemological, spatial and textual considerations” (2010, 143). A person might have different languages in their repertoire, use various dialects or a range of registers, and their listener might have a very different linguistic set that does not match up with these very closely at all,

---

<sup>8</sup> It is worth bearing in mind here that the perception of these performances is also dependent upon the linguistic and socio-cultural resources of the interlocutor. For the performance of identity see Bauman (2016).

and yet both might be described as English speakers and be seen to be using English in a particular exchange. In other words, we risk failing to appreciate the linguistic complexity of global interactions even if they are ostensibly in English, and this is perhaps seen in the frustration of proponents of English as a lingua franca, often highly critical of the linguistic skills and behaviour of mother-tongue users in an international setting (Jenkins 2007).

### ***1.2 Monolingual discourse***

Increasingly, monolingual interactions can be little short of devastating in human terms. We work with restricted languages in many settings, or simply allow colonisation by English-based communication. We find ourselves publishing papers, holding conferences or attending business meetings in this dominant tongue without being fully aware of the linguistic consequences (Anthony 2018, 27-43; Montgomery 2013, 116-117). In the long term we are significantly reducing participation and pragmatic capabilities in the local language. A highly transactional<sup>9</sup> emphasis to language learning can inculcate habits and social/political norms (Holliday 2009), and this can also be seen in the explicitly practical focus in current international language testing (Shohamy 2001). The monolingual context has probably already resulted in a significant loss of valuable original scientific research conducted in languages other than English (Antony 2018, 35) as papers are routinely refused if not written in ‘acceptable’ English. Arts and culture may also be presented in highly monolingual or monocultural terms, with ‘success’ more likely for those who fit the monolithic outlook. Even apparently ‘strong’ languages such as German suffer from lexical limitation thanks to the predominance of English in most professional spheres: scientific research, finance and economics, international law etc. (Montgomery 2013). Indeed, quite revealingly, even when the language seems lively and adaptive to present-day circumstances, this lexical limitation is undeniable. Of the 1,200 new words recognised in German by the Leibniz Institute for the German Language for 2020-21, many show the heavy influence of English: the pleasingly inventive *Coronafrisur* finds its place alongside the more anglicised *over-zoomed*, underlining the harsh linguistic reality (Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache 2021).<sup>10</sup>

We can talk of a kind of ‘mono-discourse.’ We are witnessing an excessive investment in one linguistic group of prevalent repertoires that is the result of a combination of constant and explicit economic dominance and occasionally enacted, but ever-present, military power

---

<sup>9</sup> See section 2.3 for an explanation of the transactional nature of much current second language use.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ids-mannheim.de/sprache-in-der-coronakrise/>. Last visited 31/01/2022.

(Blommaert 2005; Phillipson 1992). This in turn results in explicit language choices and also gives rise to a distinct set of predominant discourses, locking debate, and even inquiry, into a determinedly limited mindset. These predominant discourses delimit and manipulate thought through the use of classic discursive elements<sup>11</sup> such as *evidentialities* which are ostensibly generally agreed shared ‘truths’ such as the need for growth and lean, efficient governance that are actually highly ideological and politically contentious (Simpson, Mayr and Statham 2019, 64). Other discourse elements that are relevant here are: *habits of mind* that grant reassurance and elicit trust without reflection and analysis; the *presentation of agency* (transitivity) in such a way as to largely eliminate human responsibility for climate events (*e.g.* the passive is often used in reports about pollution, rather than risking legal action by nominalising the company that caused the damage); *co-opting* or *neutralising* nascent criticism or debate under the guise of Cartesian scepticism (everything is in doubt), or simply through the claim of freedom of speech and apparent impartiality;<sup>12</sup> *acceptability*, or the identification and emphasis of what is considered acceptable political or moral behaviour;<sup>13</sup> *narratives*, arguably the essence of discourse, which can be seen explicitly in the political stories presented.<sup>14</sup> Dictating *relevance* and preordaining *context* through influence over media, monolingual discourse is able to repeatedly point to what is important, to the exclusion (or removal to the periphery) of other topics or perceptions and, even more significantly, it can delimit context within the broad conception of the world available to English languages and cultures. The element of contextual control is considered vital in this paper, as it occurs largely invisibly or is rarely if ever given true consideration, but is at the same time pragmatically or discursively vital. Any monolingual situation risks seriously limiting contextual elements in our understanding of issues.

At this juncture it is well to remind ourselves of some of the things discourse can do, and thus what a monolingual discursive situation might (even inadvertently) bring about. Critical discourse analysis suggests this is surreptitious (Fairclough 2010) and perhaps malevolent (i.e. the product of asymmetric power relations), but for us it is enough to recognise the linguistic

---

<sup>11</sup> For simple definitions of discourse and discursive elements see Simpson, Mayr and Statham (2019, 5-6).

<sup>12</sup> The no-vax ‘debate,’ for example, has unquestionably suffered a surfeit of misinformation from a scientific point of view, but has been an essentially political discussion.

<sup>13</sup> This is highly deontic and largely imposed, and links with the power of endorsement from celebrity culture.

<sup>14</sup> An example of this might be a headline such as, “we are being flooded with illegal immigrants” —this is actually a contentious, highly politicised stance, but presented as a simple story involving, perhaps, boats or dinghies, cold, desperate families, wicked traffickers and inadequate state reception centres (it is noticeable how visual representation with photographs or grainy video communicate this narrative so effectively).

instruments being used and the effects they may have, which may be exaggerated in a monolingual context. *Noun-phrases* and *nominalisations* often represent the implicit use of power in language: while sounding ‘scientific’ or ‘factual’ they can pre-empt or reframe a whole debate and are difficult to argue against. Examples are numerous, perhaps the most striking currently are expressions such as ‘carbon neutral’ or ‘carbon zero’ that achieved great currency during the Glasgow COP26 conference in 2021, but have the advantage of being difficult to pin down and of lengthening any time-frame for action, while sounding positive and auspicious.<sup>15</sup> *Power* and *hierarchical considerations* are paramount in a critical discourse approach (Fairclough 2010; Foucault 2010), and we can perhaps observe these in the prevalence of direct address (e.g. the *we-* and *you-*forms: the “conversationalisation of discourse”) typical of postmodern institutional communications (Simpson, Mayr and Statham 2019, 63) and in stark contrast to discourse expectations of fifty years ago or of different cultures, where formalities such as the use of the third person or other terms of address representing social distance would be obligatory. The implication of greater intimacy might appear friendly and open, but can also be seen as invasive and allowing little distance between the powerful agent and increasingly helpless subject. This development in English language discourses links with the use of SMS, Instagram videos and tweets, creating a hurried and direct discourse environment that vitiates against complexity and risks presenting only polarised arguments (there is little room for anything else). Instead, language use is ethnographically complex (Duranti 1997) and we have multiple intentions when we communicate (“all speech devices are *plurifunctional*,” Simpson, Mayr and Statham 2019, 13). Here the monolingual global debate experiences an enforced simplification, overriding potentially more complex human relations or customs.

A world of monolingual, predominant discourses does not only prescribe topics and styles of interactions (and so debates); it also ensures that the vast majority of *intertextual referents* are from the same monocultural world. Fairclough’s (2010) description of *intertextuality*, while not perfect, is relevant here as it emphasises its unquestionable importance in how communication is achieved. For us the importance of this cannot be stressed too much: if we have a monolingual environment, then every debate and argument will be delimited by the textual world available to it, and influenced by the most prevalent textual elements within it. In other words, the whole of the planet’s understanding of (or experience of) climate catastrophe might be described and analysed with reference to conceptualisations made in English, with perhaps occasional elements permitted entry through translation. Perhaps this is all the more ironic as it was

---

<sup>15</sup> See section 1.3 for examples with brief commentary.

largely the English-speaking world that gave rise to the industrial revolution that has arguably compromised our safety in the world more than anything else.

Distinctly language-specific elements such as *collocation* and *metaphor*, which are invariably hard to translate, add to the load of monolingual and mono-cultural dominance: metaphor is fundamental in our attempts to share emotionally intense messages (Ritchie 2013) and thus vital in political dialogues or debates, while collocation choices can reveal (or conceal) ideological stances of the utmost importance, but will often pass unnoticed. The tendency for collocations to become fixed, in a process I would link with Halliday's textual function of language (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004), yet again renders the monolingual attempt to describe and understand the world fraught with the risk of incompleteness. Narratives are often language-specific and are again ideologically powerful as they can define *ends* (and so limit individual discourses), claim truths (e.g. the outcome of a conflict, who was the original aggressor and the nature of the consequent peace, whether it is just or not) and so create shared memory (Abbott 2002). At the same time, language also claims and assigns *identity*: our linguistic choices constantly present who we are (our provenance, our professions, our expertise and our character) in the arena of the postmodern society of performance (Bauman 2016, 56-57), and language also provides the tools to assess and judge these identities, qualifying them as genuine or not (Blommaert 2010, 154-179), as worthy or unworthy, as appealing or unpleasant. The voice we have in an international context is thus subject to potential distortion, by (possibly powerful) listeners as well as by the contexts of each discourse.

### ***1.3 Some examples***

To give some idea of the effects of this linguistic reality, we can very briefly examine a few examples. Of course, they come from an infinite range of instantiations of discourse in English and so have absolutely no claim to be representative, but are rather suggestive of what we are observing and the potential they present in terms of influence or limitation.<sup>16</sup> All the examples were sourced during the build-up to the COP26 event in Glasgow in 2021, and formed part of the debate surrounding the high profile conference. The distinguishing feature they shared was that they were all part of a clearly English-language view of the issues involved. Data was collected from *The Guardian* and from the *Irish Times*, but it was topicality that defined

---

<sup>16</sup> The criteria for selection were simply relevance to the climate debate in and around the COP26 meeting in Glasgow in 2021, and the noticeable presence of rhetorical elements, but the author suggests that a corpus-based study of language used on this topic might be highly revealing.

relevance: discussion as to the value of COP26, conducted in English, provided the instances of language quoted.

### **1.3.1 The “Drive Carbon Neutral” Scheme<sup>17</sup>**

It is not our place here to evaluate the merits or demerits of Shell’s scheme to offset the fossil fuel emissions of their loyalty cardholders, even if we might question their claim that by using it “You don’t even have to change the way you work” (quoted in Monbiot 2022). The campaign exploits the linguistic familiarity of the adjectival phrase “carbon neutral” and as a nominalization it is interesting in the fact that the scheme is named not merely by using direct reference to what we might call one of the major current capitalist solutions to the problem of fossil fuel use. ‘Neutral’ clearly suggests the elimination of a threat, while ‘scheme’ implies a well-planned route to the solution. Linking to what we mentioned earlier, the use of the imperative ‘drive’ in the name of the scheme creates an informal, almost conversational encouragement to take part in the proposed measure. From the level of social practice (Fairclough 1992, 73), the scheme promises a justification for maintaining present-day styles of life and work, refuting the idea of sacrifice for the benefit of the planet. It is worthy of note that Monbiot (2022) informs us that in the Netherlands claims associated with the scheme were deemed unacceptable by the local advertising standards authority.

Another linguistic observation we should make regards the concept of *carbon offsetting* that this scheme is a small part of: from a discourse perspective it is significant that this terminology has its origins in accountancy, and so we see a clear and simple example of monolingual influence in the presence of economic lexis typical of new capitalism (Simpson, Mayr and Statham 2019, 39).

### **1.3.2 The TRIPs ‘agreement’**

The Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights was adopted in 1994, came into effect in 1995, and was amended in 2017.<sup>18</sup> Its status as an ‘agreement’ seems obvious as the result of negotiations between nation states under the World Trade Organisation. However, it is an agreement we have never agreed to as individuals (though it deals with often highly individualistic cases of copyright infringement), and consent is assumed. If the

---

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.shell.co.uk/business-customers/shell-fuel-card/fuelcardco2.html>. Last visited 04/08/2022.

<sup>18</sup> For details see the World Trade Organization description at [www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/trips\\_e/intel2\\_e.htm](http://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/trips_e/intel2_e.htm). Last visited 29/01/2022.

agreement falls, then we can predict huge effects on linguistic practice,<sup>19</sup> but it is also relevant to reflect on the English-language-based idea of intellectual property that has immense influence on communicative behaviour all over the globe (how songs are reproduced, books published and translated, images protected etc.). As an additional observation, it is hardly an exaggeration to suggest that ‘agreement’ is now invariably a *forced term* in politics.

### **1.3.3 The environment**

It is interesting to reflect on a key word and concept in the whole of the sustainability debate which is so ever-present as to be almost hidden in plain sight. Leaving aside the potentially significant grammatical-morphological aspect of the term ‘environment’ in English (an abstract noun only rarely used in a plural form, and almost always with the definite article), it presents interesting etymological elements. Connected with ‘environs’ (Sykes 1982), it presupposes a closed circuit, perhaps imagining that we are going to have to find the answers staying exactly where we are, and implying that we are trapped (a victim of circumstance?). There is the revealing suggestion that we humans are at the centre (c.f. anthropocentrism), but also that we find ourselves here, rather than have clear responsibility for our physical context. These implicit semantic elements need not be present in another linguistic context, suggesting different perceptions of our surroundings.

### **1.3.4 The “freakishly influential” “millenarian weirdo”<sup>20</sup>**

Collocations<sup>21</sup> sometimes reveal stance when used inadvertently (as virtually prefabricated linguistic units or ‘strong’ collocations), but they do this more certainly when they are the result of deliberate lexical choices (presumably for stylistic or pragmatic effect). Two short noun (and adjectival) phrases used to describe Greta Thunberg (quoted in O’Connell 2019) provide striking exemplification of this: they make their evident hostility their pragmatic *raison d’être*, and at the same time show clear discursive elements. The positive connotation of ‘influential’ is contrasted with the insulting term ‘freakish’ which gives no credit to the individual for her apparent political successes. Indeed the originator of the phrase (Andrew Bolt) is wholly hostile

---

<sup>19</sup> These changes in linguistic practice might come about because, with less clear or enforced copyright rules, texts will be more freely available (and perhaps undergo alteration, doctoring or severe editing), translations will be more plentiful, though perhaps of lesser quality, and ideas of identity and language performance may be reinterpreted. Linguistic corpora might even be easier to construct, using text that is now commonly not available to researchers (e.g. pop song lyrics etc.).

<sup>20</sup> The two epithets are quoted by O’Connell (2019).

<sup>21</sup> See Dellar and Walkley (2016, 147) for a simple definition.

to her efforts, and this is underlined by another descriptor, ‘deeply disturbed’ (again with psychological implications). In what we can suggest is more a generalised discourse effect than merely a coincidence, another writer (Brendon O’Neill) used the phrase ‘millenarian weirdo’ in his ‘*ad feminam*’ attack: the attempt to create a mini-discourse of psychological inferiority (“freakish,” “weirdo”) seems evident. It is worth noting O’Neill’s criticism of Thunberg’s language (“monotone voice”), despite her English being excellent and pragmatically creative and incisive (e.g. her “Blah, blah, blah” tweet before COP26 in 2021), and of her appearance (“dread in her eyes”). We can suggest here a shared discourse community in English that attempts to present climate crisis campaigners as in some way unhinged and at best worthy of our sympathy, thus tying in with the evidentialities aspect of power in discourse that we mentioned above (which implies that common sense denies the imminence of climate catastrophe).

#### **1.4 Race**

There is no place here for an analysis of such a complex, controversial and historically significant term, but Simpson, Mayr and Statham (2019, 23-26) provide a brief and clear outline of the discursive issues connected to it. However complex race is, both lexically and politically, we include it as a reminder of how an essential falsehood (that ‘race’ can have a true biological basis) can achieve intensity and meaning in language. The history of the term is of itself interesting, appearing in English from the Italian *razza* by way of French, and originally used with an explicitly positive connotation, denoting ‘good breeding’ or ‘being of good family,’ before inverting semantically to gain its present hostile import (Sykes 1982). It is inaccurate, often naively binary, hierarchical and damaging, but can incite anger, distort discourses and define destinies. On a connected note, it is worth reflecting on the whole linguistic apparatus associated with terms such as race. Rather than the well-known folk-linguistic falsehood of the Inuit’s fifty words for snow (Duranti 1997, 55-56), we might more profitably reflect on the vast list of terms in Brazilian Portuguese once used to describe finely-differentiated ‘racial’ types: testament to the enormous value attached (in particular in the 19th and earlier centuries) to demarcation of skin colour and ethnicity (Akala 2018, 54, lists numerous variations and, quoting Wolfe, claims a total of five hundred). In English it is simple to reflect on the extreme sensitivity connected to every single racially-weighted term and the negative effects they will have whenever used, while a more difficult issue is whether our monolingual global discourse is, perhaps unintentionally, racist in the way it excludes certain groups or communities, disempowers certain speakers or reinforces inequalities.

## 2. A linguistic contribution to sustainability

If we accept the premise that a largely monolingual global debate is unlikely to be fully equipped to achieve or underpin sustainable ways of life (Fairclough 2010), then we are obliged to seek linguistic solutions, or at least a linguistic contribution to the struggle for sustainability (Stibbe 2013). There are, I suggest, a number of steps that must be taken to enrich debate and human coexistence, offering the dual benefits of greater opportunities for planetary safeguarding and better distribution of resources, enabling broader expression and preserving more varied cultural existences.

Localisation of understanding, rather than interpretations imposed from above or from the linguistic-/knowledge-/economic-centre, will empower the base, and so communities. This means embracing a plurilingual approach to communication, in direct contrast to the internationally accredited English certification system that has been so influential, especially in the last fifty years.<sup>22</sup> This approach is complex and not yet perfectly defined, but will involve: localised language practices (Pennycook 2010); the recognition of bilingualism and multilingualism as being ‘normal’ (which represents a revolution when compared with the [linguistically inaccurate] modernist monolingual worldview); an increasingly two-way-street model for global interactions (which will be ‘a good fit’ with current media and technological developments, where users are already encouraged to contribute input);<sup>23</sup> a de-centring of discourse itself, with America, western Europe or the ‘developed world’ relinquishing hegemony. I suggest that this is urgently necessary, however hard to attain, and might ironically be assisted by the crisis in western democracies we are at present witnessing.<sup>24</sup>

Plurilinguistic practices will assist in the development of critiques of current discursive habits and assumptions, as conceptualisations encoded in other languages become more widely available. In other words, we can aim for unrestricted linguistic and critical skills that are all the more necessary in a period of information crisis caused by the prevalence of fake news. Connected with this will be a renewed emphasis on reception and understanding in language

---

<sup>22</sup> We should mention Phillipson (2010; 1992) here: his critique of language teaching and examinations is relevant even if it has received significant criticism. Certainly the view that there have been powerful commercial (and perhaps mercantilist) impulses behind language teaching methodologies and tests deserves consideration.

<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting here the repeated invitations on the websites of organisations such as the BBC and newspapers such as the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* for reader generated copy: readers are routinely asked if they were present at a particular event, or even for photos and videos to upload for payment.

<sup>24</sup> Here I allude to the storming of the Capitol in January 2021 in the USA and the crisis of the constitution in the United Kingdom since Brexit, involving a controversial prorogation of Parliament in 2019 which was later found to be illegal, among other elements.

education, in contrast to the ‘tyranny of production’ that has characterised the linguistic aspect of the neoliberal period. Instead of encouraging limited, but instantly performed, language abilities, which invariably tend towards transactional purposes, teaching should favour developing skills for understanding, and stress the various layers of reflection a text can offer (Thornbury 2005). This will be a challenge, both to teachers and especially examiners because testing comprehension is theoretically the most difficult area of language testing (Hughes 1989), but it is fundamental to challenging the unsustainable monolingual hegemony of the present.

### ***2.1 Translation as a linguistic solution***

No linguistic behaviour focuses on comprehension more explicitly and deeply than the process of translation. Sometimes lamented as the ‘forgotten skill’ in discussions about English language teaching (Cook 2010), translation offers contact with otherness and difference. It preserves rather than eliminates contrasts, inviting the maintenance of plurality in the mind of the translator. It has been defined as negotiation (Eco 2004) and so challenges limited assumptions and requires repeated thought and reflection. Translation is also a process that can be repeated very fruitfully, adding layers of potential meaning to discourses, and inevitably challenges predominant narratives. It can allow others their voice and carry (as the noun *translation* suggests) this voice further afield. Perhaps most significant of all, translation demands respect for the essential untranslatability of metaphor. When we are forced to deal with intensely complex, and emotive issues, very often only metaphor will do as we try to communicate (Ritchie 2013). Translators have to work and re-work their appreciation and representation of these issues, and so help us to do justice to specificity and the complex nature of problems. Perhaps most significant for our topic, translation also offers a conduit of survival for languages under threat, allowing new ideas to percolate into different societies and aiding the preservation of cultures, strengthening connection rather than isolation.

It is worth remembering that translation was (and is) often hidden in modernist discourse (Venuti 2008) and explicitly forbidden in modernist language teaching models (e.g. the Direct Method; the Audio-lingual Method). Besides any general educational benefits that translation has always been credited with (Cook 2010), we can see here the clear value it possesses as a means to crack open the limits of monolingual or monocultural discourse. But we must beware, because advanced machine translation and translating apps risk eliminating or concealing difference and excluding most people from the experience of exploring understanding, reinforcing the restrictions of our global discourse habits.

## ***2.2 Sustainable linguistic behaviour***

In addition to allowing and encouraging translation in order to broaden discourses, what else would increase the sustainability of global language use? Teaching has already been mentioned and is of vital importance: we should seek to educate the widest range of potential participants in any international debate, and most of all in discussions about the climate crisis and other imminent threats. That is to say, language teaching must offer more than transactional skills, opening questions rather than offering merely the means to get what we need in the here and now or give service to another. This linguistic enrichment will re-open scientific inquiry, providing researchers with the ability to free themselves and their research from predominant discourses and assumptions that are not truly sustainable long-term because they lack nuance and variety. We must move from the *era of production* to the *age of appreciation* in language skills, although this will admittedly mean greater complexity in testing. Language examinations will have to take more subjective aspects of linguistic performance into account, and there is still a debate to be had concerning the importance of grammatical accuracy.<sup>25</sup> Translation should be included in any high-level language test, even if this means of necessity producing different examinations for different language pairs. This naturally makes international certification more challenging. The outcome may be less efficient, but it will certainly be more valid.

In simple terms, perhaps neoliberalism and new capitalism have taught us how to be very good at doing (what is often) the wrong thing, and instead we need to talk about doing the right thing. Of course, this is of obvious importance to any debate on the climate emergency. At the moment we barely have the linguistic means to address these questions openly enough, leaving discussion trapped in pre-ordained channels and remaining polarised.

### ***2.2.1 Elements of sustainable linguistic behaviour***

For languages to be truly sustainable in a sustainable future, the linguistic context will require certain elements that might be considered indispensable. There will need to be a much deeper *appreciation* of how language works, building on research traditions in pragmatics and discourse analysis (Jones 2019; Blommaert 2010; Hymes 1972), along with awareness of context, and psychological and sociological perspectives on performance. *Multimodality* must be described and analysed in all of its constantly developing guises (Caple 2018). Metaphor has been mentioned previously (1.2) and is considered fundamental for our emotional needs, for

---

<sup>25</sup> For information about this debate see Jenkins (2015), especially pages 23-35. Mackenzie (2014) also reflects on this in depth in his work.

representation, and even for description. A new lexis for truth is a dire necessity, both in politics and in the communication of scientific research, which has become compromised in recent years by the need for impact and the use of social media to describe research findings.

The need for new lexical and discursive resources to treat current questions adequately is already clear: an example is the intense political and philosophical issue of (supposedly illegal) migration facing Europe, where antiquated and failing legislation (Agamben 2005) is coupled with inaccurate, even racist vocabulary, revealing the utterly inappropriate, or even damaging, linguistic terms we find ourselves relying on (Blommaert 2010) to feel our way to solutions or at least policies in response. Perhaps nowhere is the unsustainable nature of current discursive practice so blatantly laid bare as with the migrant crisis. The monolingual world cannot even describe the complexity of migrant experience because it habitually uses discourses born of a colonial past (Sanghera 2021; Mbembe 2017). The migrant crisis is an example of when “discourse exercises its own control; rules concerned with the principles of classification, ordering and distribution” (Foucault 2010, 220). We don’t usually have the means to break out of these strictures on our own, employing the habitual reflexes of prevalent discourses. A plurilingual environment will be helpful, offering contrast and perspective, and will ultimately be more sustainable.

### **2.2.2 The benefits of sustainable language**

Sustainable language is inclusive, multiple and rich. It must contain a wide range of repertoires that will enable us to observe and understand our own discourses (and biases), and value and interact with others. This will allow us to articulate thoughts about the crises we face. For example, recognising the climate crisis as an ethical crisis<sup>26</sup> (Worster 2016). We will have the tools to understand language itself more deeply than classical linguistics ever could, having accepted the centrality of events and context in linguistic behaviour (Foucault 2010, 215-237), rather than falling for the modernist assumption of systematicity. This may allow the transformation of ecocriticism into proposing plans for action, and assist the rest of society to engage in debate about it.

Language can preserve, nurture and give meaning to *ritual*, either reinforcing previous injustice or creating opportunities for re-evaluation and change. And this is vital as “ritual defines the

---

<sup>26</sup> It is perhaps interesting to observe historically just how long the climate crisis took to escape the outer confines of scientific debate, enter peripheral politics and finally become a mainstream topic. Only very recently can it be seen as posing profound ethical questions to a wider audience (e.g. the potential need for vegetarianism or a reassessment of conceptions of ownership of resources, among others).

qualifications required of the speaker” (Foucault 2010, 225): if these rituals are monocultural, we risk impoverishing the debate by permitting fewer speakers. At the same time, we must guard against the danger of the monocultural abuse of *formulations*: at the end of a conference such as COP26 we expect declarations (of intent, and as claims of truth about the state of the planet), but it is well to remember that all formulations analysed linguistically “are the product of power” (Simpson, Mayr and Statham 2019, 15). The current threat is that Halliday’s textual function of language (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004) and Bourdieu’s social ritual (Bourdieu 1991) result in a constant reaffirmation of a monolingual experience of global issues and the description of them. This is perhaps one of the reasons why we have scientists warning that climate catastrophe is imminent (at COP26 and especially beyond its confines) and politicians and powerful companies that continue to excogitate ways of preserving an unsustainable status quo for just a little longer. Even the critiques and the warnings, however acutely expressed, can feed into a ritualised dialogue that pushes us towards unsustainability and collapse, while implying that meaningful steps in mitigation are being taken. They can become part of a polarised discourse that functions on its own terms and makes little headway in ethical understanding or change. There is a risk that the language used can even reaffirm counter-arguments (perhaps the result of dextrous linguistic sleights of hand) as an ironic discourse effect of intertextuality, and this process becomes guaranteed by careless ideas of freedom and impartiality.<sup>27</sup> Sustainable communication (potentially) has the capacity to resist this with wider reference and more inclusive debate.

### 3. Conclusions and future prospects

Sustainable language implies an adept capacity to treat complexity. And this is all the more necessary when we are faced, not only with imminent natural catastrophe, but when we also find ourselves exposed to greater social diversity. We need, for example, to take gender complexity into account, and languages are generally ill-suited to the process: there may be a revolution in many grammars, as well as in lexis, not only to describe new sexual realities or categories, but, more importantly, to establish the linguistic practices and social rituals necessary to address them respectfully.

---

<sup>27</sup> The interesting concept of de-growth is perhaps an example of this: it is still part of the economics-led discourse about growth, and risks, if defeated in the argument, even reminding people just how attractive a growing economy is. Certainly, it is a hard sell to persuade people of the benefits of making them poorer, and this is how the concept of de-growth can be couched.

We have already referred to elements in sustainable language teaching, but we should broaden this to the question of education as a whole. Education is the gatekeeper of discourses. It is the “social appropriation of discourse” and allows us “to gain access to any kind of discourse” (Foucault 2010, 227). This is all the more urgent in an interconnected, internet-based, information society, and the lack of real educational resources for all, and at all ages, perhaps explains the problems of fake news and the ‘infodemic’ bedevilling us today. Sustainable language use requires time, effort and concentration, an emphasis on aesthetics as much as economics (presently even art is presented in discourses highly influenced by economic values; non-fungible tokens being the latest, most extreme iteration of this), and an ability to relinquish control (something language learning engenders). This makes the endeavour idealistic and difficult to attain, perhaps, but no less important for that.

More inclusive attitudes towards linguistic diversity mean greater safety for minority languages (if their voices are heard, they may be preserved),<sup>28</sup> and better information and communication for sustainability, both cultural and ecological. This challenges the neo-colonialism of measures such as carbon offsetting (Monbiot 2022) or the hypocrisy of repeated grand, empty promises made (in the main) by western governments, by questioning the highly effective sloganizing that is a characteristic element of postmodern discursive practice, and by bearing witness to their effects on the ground. We need to push wider and deeper into language to render life sustainable: we are not prisoners of the language we use, but we do risk the constraints of habits of form and discourse. Indeed, discourse is “essentially historical,” “made up not of available elements, but of real, successive events” (Foucault 2010, 228-231), and this gives vastness to language, in contrast to the limits of a system or a transactional tool. Sustainable language is open to other ways of saying, and conscious of the complex of events that make up the discourses we use to relate to each other and the world. Given the intensity of the crisis we face, we need all the linguistic resources we can get.

**Richard Chapman** *is a researcher in English Language at the University of Ferrara, Italy and a member of the Doctoral programme “Sustainable environment and wellbeing” (UniFe). Publications include numerous course-books for language learners and studies in developments*

---

<sup>28</sup> Technology is not the threat it is invariably made out to be in this regard: many minority languages are finding space, contacts and potential importance (not to say preservation) in websites and Facebook pages. However, the picture is typically complex, as the experience of Icelandic shows: social media and the internet are rendering it a restricted mother-tongue among younger speakers, not being used by them for many domains as they find English more natural and faster when discussing popular music, videogames and even the climate crisis.

*in language from a sociolinguistic, textual and pragmatic point of view, along with work on computer-assisted language testing, the pragmatics of language tests, corpus linguistics and the roles of English as a Lingua Franca.*

## Works cited

- Abbott, H. Porter. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell. London: The University of Chicago Press Ltd, 2005.
- Akala (Daley, Kingsley). *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*. London: Two Roads (John Murray), 2018.
- Anthony, Laurence. *Introducing English for Specific Purposes*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Baker, Will. "Culture and Complexity through English as a Lingua Franca: Rethinking Competencies and Pedagogy in ELT." *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca* 4.1 (2015): 9-30.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Strangers at Our Door*. Cambridge: The Polity Press, 2016.
- Blommaert, Jan. *Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- . *The Sociolinguistics of Globalisation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. London: Polity, 1991.
- Caple, Helen. "Analysing the Multimodal Text." *Corpus Approaches to Discourse*. Edited by Charlotte Taylor and Anna Marchi. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018.
- Cook, Guy. *Translation in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Crystal, David. *Language Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Dellar, Hugh and Andrew Walkley. *Teaching Lexically: Principles and Practice*. Peaslake: Delta Publishing, 2016.
- De Swaan, Abram. "Language Systems." *The Handbook of Language and Globalization*. Edited by Nikolas Coupland. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2013.
- Duranti, Alessandro. *Linguistic Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Eco, Umberto. *Engines of Our Ingenuity*. University of Houston. <https://www.uh.edu/engines/epi2723.htm>. Last visited 30/01/2022.
- . *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Dallas: SIL International, 2009.
- . *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2010.

- . *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity, 1992.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Language and The Discourse on Language*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.
- Halliday, Michael A. K. and Christian M. I. M. Matthiessen. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Hodder Education, 2004.
- Holliday, Adrian. "The Role of Culture in English Language Education: Key Challenges." *Language and Intercultural Communication* 9.3 (2009): 144-155.
- Hughes, Arthur. *Testing for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Hymes, Dell. "On Communicative Competence." *Sociolinguistics*. Edited by John Pride and Janet Holmes. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972. 269-285.
- Jenkins, Jennifer. *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- . *Global Englishes: A Resource Book for Students, 3rd ed.* Abingdon: Routledge, 2015.
- Jones, Rodney H. *Discourse Analysis*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2019.
- Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache. "Sprache in der Coronakrise" 2021. <https://www.ids-mannheim.de/sprache-in-der-coronakrise/>. Last visited 31/01/2022.
- Mackenzie, Ian. *English as a Lingua Franca: Theorizing and Teaching English*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Critique of Black Reason*. Trans. Laurent Dubois. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Monbiot, George. "Carbon Offsetting is not Warding Off Environmental Collapse—It's Accelerating it." *The Guardian* 26 January 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jan/26/carbon-offsetting-environmental-collapse-carbon-land-grab>. Last visited 12/12/2022.
- Montgomery, Scott L. *Does Science Need a Global Language?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- O'Connell, Jennifer. "Why is Greta Thunberg so Triggering for Certain Men?" *The Irish Times* 7 September 2019. <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/why-is-greta-thunberg-so-triggering-for-certain-men-1.4002264>. Last visited 12/12/2022.
- Ostler, Nicholas. *Empires of the Word*. London: Harper Collins, 2005.
- . *The Last Lingua Franca: English until the Return of Babel*. London: Allen Lane, 2010.
- Pennycook, Alastair. *Language as a Local Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2010.
- Phillipson, Robert. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- . *Linguistic Imperialism Continued*. Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 2010.

- Ritchie, David. L. *Metaphor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Sanghera, Sathnam. *Empireland*. London: Viking Penguin, 2021.
- Shohamy, Elana. *The Power of Tests: A Critical Perspective on the Uses of Language Tests*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001.
- Simpson, Paul, Mayr Andrea and Simon Statham. *Language and Power*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2019.
- Stibbe, Arran. "Ecolinguistics and Globalization." *The Handbook of Language and Globalization*. Edited by Nikolas Coupland. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2013. 406-425.
- Sykes, John Bradbury. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Seventh Edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Thornbury, Scott. *Beyond the Sentence: Introducing Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Macmillan Education, 2005.
- Worster, Donald, *Shrinking the Earth: The Rise and Decline of American Abundance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- World Trade Organization. *Overview: The TRIPS Agreement*. [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/trips\\_e/intel2\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/trips_e/intel2_e.htm). Last visited 29/01/2022.
- Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008.