Languages and Culture in Australia in the 21st Century: Riding the Multilingual Tiger

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It is often stated that we live in a world where English is increasingly the one dominant global language of communication, culture and economic activity. The impact of English is now reported to be so ubiquitous that other big players, such as French, are now arguably being squeezed out. These observations lead some observers to the notion that native English-speakers have no need to learn any other language. There is ample evidence, however, to suggest that English-speaking monolingualism is, in fact, an outdated notion and one that is dangerous for the future well-being of this country. Any nation, including Australia, that wants to take full advantage of the new international economy must be fully linguistically prepared. Australia’s citizens need to be multilingual, not just bilingual, to be competitive and to contribute. Strong public and private investment in Australia’s language capacity is, therefore, essential to the future success of this nation.

Political theorists have long recognized the central role language and culture play in the world’s social, political and economic order. Fukuyama’s seminal paper on the end of history following the collapse of communism specifically considered the language issue and argued that English would become the world’s single global language sufficient for communication everywhere. This stance reflected the sense at the time of the inevitability of permanent English-speaking (that is, American) leadership of the world. Other theorists, such as Lester Thurow and Samuel Huntington, have been quick to respond to Fukuyama’s views on the new world order, and have pointed instead to the inevitability of cultural, linguistic and economic competition. Thurow’s World of Conflict model, for instance, predicts that world order and economy to operate in some seven to nine languages spread across three major trading blocs.¹ Such a system is arguably already in place.

The Ups and Downs of World Languages

As Australians, we should not be lulled into believing that any advantages we gain as speakers of English are permanent or that the advantages are even ours. The recent

¹ I am indebted to Joe Lo Bianco for bringing these observations to my attention. My thanks also go to Nanette Gottlieb for information on recent UNESCO policy initiatives discussed below.
Nuffield Inquiry on the state of languages in Great Britain made explicit its concern that non-Britons learning English were doing so for their own benefit and not for that of Great Britain.

We need also to be reminded that the current pre-eminence of English may only be temporary. The history of civilization is littered with dead and fallen international languages, for example Akkadian, Latin, Ancient Greek, & Sanskrit. Portuguese was for centuries the preferred language of international communication in East and Southeast Asia. French was the pre-eminent language of international affairs until WW2. Few predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent decline of Russian influence in the world. German was the predominant language of science until the end of the 19th century. Until WW2 it was also the language of wider communication in central and eastern Europe. It is now poised to regain this status—overtaking both Russian and English in coming years.

It was only a few years ago that experts predicted that America’s and Australia’s future would very soon be Japanese—a reflection of what was at the time the growing economic strength of Japan. Cultural dominance was sure to follow—seen most eloquently in images of Los Angeles in the futuristic film Blade Runner. But today nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, as shown below, the US is being drawn inexorably into the orbit of the Spanish-speaking world.

While the number of English-speakers is reported to be still rising around the world, there are signs already of a new linguistic balance in the making. The Internet, for instance, is often cited as an example of the global strength of the English language, supposedly reflecting English-speaking domination of new technologies, international communication and trade. But if the Internet is in fact a reliable indicator of language strength in the new e-economy, then the signs for English are worrying. They also demonstrate how quickly the ground can move from under the dominant player. In 1990 some 95 percent of internet pages were in English. By 1997 the proportion of English language homepages had dropped to 80 percent. It had fallen further to only 45 percent by 2001 and continues to drop. One recent prediction suggests that as early as 2003 the proportion of internet pages in Chinese will overtake that of English. The Chinese economy has now been growing for two decades at an annual rate of some 10 percent. It is only a matter of time before the full weight of China’s increasingly wealthy 1.2 billion citizens is felt around the world.

Multilingualism as the Natural Human Order of Things and Good for Business

Investigation of societies around the world—both pre- and post-industrial—demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of people are and always have been multilingual. The rise of the monolingual is a relatively recent and in fact short lived phenomenon which is inextricably linked to the nation-state. The nation-state depends on a strict relationship between nation, people and language; national boundaries are rigorously defined and it becomes critical that all citizens of that state speak the language of the state. At the same time economic policy tends to be inward looking focussing on domestic economic development.

Technological, economic and social changes have dramatically weakened the concept of the nation-state around the world. We are no longer just national citizens, but also increasingly global citizens who interact with a wide range of peoples, cultures and languages as a normal part of our daily activities anywhere in the world. Critical to
this transformation is today’s ease of movement, communication and trade. In Australia’s case, evidence of internationalization and mobility is found across a whole range of sectors. Examples include:

1. an explosion in the value of Australian service exports, including in the area of education whether in Australia or overseas (now worth billions annually to this country);

2. the rising number of foreign visitors to this country. Most recent projections now talk of an increase to some 20 million tourists annually to Australia possibly within a decade;

3. the rise of expatriate communities of Australian professionals now established throughout major cities in Asia, parts of the Middle East, and Europe. The Australians in question are highly qualified, economically advanced and in many cases have specific language capabilities.

It’s not just individuals who are on the move, whole businesses are now shifting as well. Japan’s Sony Corp in June 2001 announced it would move its entire currency sector (A$42 billion traded annually) to Europe, as a cost cutting measure. Other Japanese companies are now expected to move offshore for the same reason. Similarly, in the same month, the Swiss Stock Exchange transferred its entire domestic blue-chip market (first day of trade: US$2.2 billion) to London, once again to lower costs. There are now so many German-English and French-English finance sector bilinguals who have moved to London that many German- and French-speaking companies claim they are able to operate there just as easily as at home, and at lower cost.

Cities and countries around the world now compete aggressively for corporate regional and international headquarters. Despite much higher costs, Singapore and Hong Kong remain more attractive than Sydney and Melbourne—partly because of geography but also because of the wide-ranging and generalized multilingual skills they can provide in addition to English.

Multilingual Europe: the New Wave

A vision of Australia’s multilingual future is already evident in Europe. The Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam signed in the 1990s by members of the European Union guarantee the right to free circulation for all citizens—as an essential economic, social and cultural objective. Australia has at the same time indirectly participated in the same process by signing a number of bilateral agreements with non-English speaking countries in Europe allowing young people to work freely in signatory countries on temporary work visas.

To facilitate mobility in Europe, the EU has also recently developed a new long-term language policy: all citizens are expected to be trilingual (mother tongue plus two more languages, at least one of which is another EU official language). Enormous sums are being spent on large-scale programs, such as SOCRATES and LEONARDO, to promote language learning in all education sectors.²

² Of course it’s not all about economics. The SO CRATES program specifically states: ‘proficiency in several languages does more than simply promote individual development: it also contributed to a genuine feeling of European citizenship’.
A Eurobarometer survey conducted across the EU in December 2000 (sample: 15900 subjects) showed that 53 percent of respondents were already bilingual, and fully 26 percent were already trilingual. Those countries that reported the highest levels of English as second language (for example, the Netherlands and Denmark: 75-80 percent) also reported the highest levels of third language competence (50-59 percent). As these figures show a majority of the population of these nations is already trilingual.

The lowest levels of second language knowledge are of course found in English-speaking members of the EU: UK and Ireland. The negative consequences of this lagging performance are only now being fully understood, and have generated considerable concern—as seen in the Nuffield Report on Languages in the UK (see below).

As the following table amply demonstrates, knowledge of a second language correlates quite clearly with age, educational and, in particular, economic success.

Table 1: Age, sex, educational and occupational status & second language skill in the European Union (Eurobarometer Survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-demographic category</th>
<th>% claiming 2nd language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Above average</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educated up to age 20+</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged 15–24</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged 25–39</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EU average</strong></td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Below Average</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged 40–54</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual Workers</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Persons</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged 55+</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educated to age 15 or younger</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the evidence also points to a strong correlation between language skills and economic success in Europe. The Netherlands, Denmark and Luxembourg, with the highest levels of multilingualism and greatest spending on language teaching, are also the richest nations in the European Union. Of the three Scandinavian countries in the survey (Finland, Denmark and Sweden), the poorest nation (Finland) also had significantly lower language skills. The only other country in the sample that has language skills as low as those reported for the UK and Ireland is Portugal—by far the poorest country in the EU.

These are not purely statistical correlations. Twenty-one percent of those surveyed already used another language for oral communication—face to face or telephone—at work. Parents are quick to recognize as a result the economic benefits of
multilingualism. Some 74 percent of parents in the sample wanted their children to learn another language specifically to improve job opportunities.

The Advance of Multilingualism in the English-speaking World

The idea that English alone is enough to operate in the new transnational economy is so patently false that it’s surprising so many people continue to believe it. There is no doubt that the sheer size of the economic aggregation of the US, Canada, the UK, Australia and other smaller English-speaking countries, is a powerful force in the spread of English language and culture around the world. But one only has to scratch the surface to find many indicators pointing to a positive shift to multilingualism—sometimes by stealth, sometimes by design—in large areas of the English-speaking world.

• Canada has long actively promoted a federal bilingual policy as an essential social and economic objective, in recognition of the fact that 25 percent of its population has always been first language French-speaking. As a result of well-resourced policy initiatives, including the provision of bilingual immersion education, long-term trends confirm an increasing number of Canadians reporting themselves to be bilingual (English-French). In addition to the social and economic benefits of bilingualism, English-speaking middle-classes are further motivated by the now well-known wide-ranging cognitive benefits of bilingual and multilingual education, as confirmed by rigorous long-term research conducted in Canada since the 1970s.

• The United States is of course seen to be the principal driving force of the promotion of English as a global language in the 20th and 21st centuries. Sheer critical mass (in terms of population and an enormous internal economic market), coupled with technological innovation and military and political clout, have long worked together to drive global promotion of the American way of life, language and culture. American exports of technological and cultural production (film, television and music) are now worth hundreds of billions of dollars annually. Whilst the assumption is that all this exported production, especially of a cultural and intellectual nature, is in English, in fact a substantial proportion is created in or repackaged—in the US—for specific language markets. Whilst the images might be American, the language is often not. American business is aware of the financial potential, and has responded pro-actively to the language needs of specific markets around the world, in all areas of goods and services. The US is in fact a leader in multilingual international trade.

Current trends also show that the number of English-speaking monolinguals in the US is dropping fast, with an increasing move to bilingualism. The United States is now so well advanced in a process of social and linguistic transformation that earlier this year, America’s Time magazine led with a cover story (‘Welcome to Amexica’) on the progressive Hispanicization of the US. The most recent US census figures collected in 2000 confirm that 20 percent (and rising) of the American population is now Spanish-speaking. The increase in the ten years from 1990 was 58 percent. In many areas, especially in California, Texas and Florida, Spanish speakers already now outnumber English-speakers. Even in Los Angeles, a megalopolis of some 10 million, and the ostensible home of English-speaking Hollywood, Spanish-speakers now form the largest ethnic group and will soon form the outright majority. New York’s most popular radio station, Mega, broadcasts bilingually (mostly Spanish) and has captured 18 percent of the city’s highly competitive listener market.
‘Bilingual, binational—he is the whole global economy in a suit’

(Time 2001)

American English-speakers have responded pro-actively to the rise of Spanish in the US, recognising the economic and social benefits of multilingualism. American business increasingly targets—through the medium of Spanish—America’s domestic Spanish-speaking market, but also the much larger Latin American market. Many of the nation’s current popular cultural icons are in fact bilinguals, who make music and film in English and Spanish for the respective language markets.

Traditional English monolinguals also show increasing willingness to become bilinguals. The University of Wisconsin at Madison, relatively close to the Canadian border, has an annual first-year beginners Spanish intake of 2300 students. This number does not in fact reflect true demand. An obligatory second language requirement (that is, students must also enrol in one more foreign language) is also in place as a way of controlling numbers. Even the traditional American elite recognizes the importance of language skills: non-Hispanics increasingly pitch their newly found bilingual skills as good for politics and business.

• The United Kingdom has, of all major English-speaking countries, been least able to adapt to a multilingual future, and provides a salutary lesson to Australia about the dangers of underestimating the value of languages to the national good. So serious is the situation in the UK that there is now a newly emerged national consensus in support of major action to address the negative economic and social consequences of Britain’s failure to meet the language challenge. The Nuffield Foundation conducted a national inquiry whose findings, published in May 2000, are stark: low levels of language capability, university language sector in crisis, a desperate shortage of language teachers, inadequate language choice, lack of coordinated language policy, and lack of direction or motivation, desperate lack of language skills in the workforce. Its first two findings are:

(1) English is not enough

‘... in a smart and competitive world, exclusive reliance on English leaves the UK vulnerable and dependant on the linguistic competence and goodwill of others’.

(2) Young people in the UK are at a disadvantage in the recruitment market.

‘The UK workforce suffers from a chronic shortage of people at all levels with useable language skills ... often [business’s] only option is to recruit native speakers of other languages. Mobility of employment is in danger of becoming the preserve of people from other countries’. The success of London as a financial centre in attracting foreign business currently depends not on the adequate supply of locals with language skills but on adequate numbers of multilingual foreigners moving to London.

The Nuffield Report also makes a number of major recommendations, including:

(1) designation of languages as a national skill ‘... by virtue of their direct contribution to economic competitiveness, intercultural tolerance and social cohesion ...’;

(2) a national languages strategy geared towards developing a languages capability in the UK;

(3) appointment of a language supremo. In a real sign of how serious the issue is, the report suggests that ‘to be effective, the supremo should be attached to the Cabinet Office and have direct access to the Prime Minister’;
(4) raising the profile of languages through a sustained national campaign;
(5) making language study at upper-level secondary an obligatory prerequisite for university entry.

- Australia is, in comparison with the UK, a leader in many aspects of languages policy, including the already existing designation in this country of language study as one of eight key learning areas in schools. Government policy in favour of expanding Australia’s language repertoire in schools and universities has also led the way. From the early 1970s to 1994 the government commissioned no less than sixteen reports on the role of languages in Australia’s international trade. Each one recommended action in favour of more and wider language study, and many proposals were eventually adopted.

Australian business has also long recognised the need for a major expansion in the number of Australians with appropriate language skills to help meet demand caused by new economic activities. Projections made in the early 1990s estimated a quadrupling of the number of customer contact staff (40,800 to 170,800) who would need working language and/or cultural skills. A long-term study of advertisements (from 1980 to 1992) confirms a massive expansion of languages skills requirements in Australia jobs sector, with a 6445 percent increase in twelve years from 8 to 542 a month in two newspapers. Surveys also show that Australian jobs requiring language skills cover a vast range of work categories—from lower level service occupations to higher level managerial positions.

All that said, Australia still appears seriously underprepared, and much more is still required in this country. Whereas some 69 percent of European managers speak at least one other language, a survey in the early 1990s found less than one percent of Australian managers had similar language skills. The Australian situation has undoubtedly improved somewhat since then, but clearly a great deal remains to be done to improve Australia’s multilingual capacity. A survey of Australian businesses in Indonesia also found that 70 percent reported problems of language-related communication breakdown, but that only 13 percent attempted to carry out business in Indonesian.

Short Examples of Language Needs and Benefits
A number of short examples are provided here to demonstrate why a well-developed language capability is important. Specific reference to how Australia’s languages skills can help is also made in some cases.

(1) Global Information Gathering and Managing Strategic Interests
Recent press reports talk of a global network of data gathering, known as Echelon, on the part of the major English-speaking nations (US, UK, Canada and Australia). Partly as a result of this activity, American authorities are increasingly concerned about the burgeoning language requirements needed to manage US strategic interests—political and commercial—in the world. A wide number of languages have been identified including Korean, Chinese and Arabic. Spending on language capability is rising rapidly with the US State Department increasing the provision of language training ninefold in the period 1997 to 1999.
(2) East Timor

Initiatives in favour of Australia’s language capability have tended to focus on major trading and cultural languages, but very recent experience demonstrates the need for capacity in much smaller languages as well. Currently, all of Australia’s priority Asian languages, including Indonesian, have at least 50 million speakers, but this was still insufficient for Australia’s entry into East Timor. Australia’s military required rapid training in Tetun to be able to operate effectively. University experts and the East Timorese community resident in Australia provided the necessary expertise.

Commercial opportunities for Australian business have also arisen since the events of 1999 in East Timor. Lonely Planet, a highly successful Australian company with a global network, working with an Australian university, has just published a new East Timor phrasebook (in Tetun and three other local languages), with at least three distinct markets. In the first instance, international aid workers, observers and military personnel need local language skills immediately. In the longer term, the phrasebook will assist in developing the English language skills of young East Timorese. It is also intended to help kickstart the development of East Timor’s tourism industry by encouraging adventurous travellers around the world to visit the nation. The total cost of the project is relatively low but the overall economic benefit to Australia (including export earnings), to its new neighbour and the more general benefit to Australian-East Timorese relations are substantially greater.

(3) International Students vote with their feet in Australia’s universities

The trend towards multilingualism is evident in Asia as well, if the enrolments patterns of international students in Australia are any indicator. Language departments at a number of Australian universities report a substantial increase in international Asian students enrolling in European languages over the last five years—including up to 25 percent of the first year beginners French intake in some places, with the same pattern increasingly evident in other European languages. Australia is in a unique position to take advantage of this opportunity in providing multilingual education for an expanding Asian market.

(4) Some Australian students also vote with their feet

Suggestions of a general contraction in university language offerings and enrolments around the country are not in evidence everywhere. At some universities language enrolments over the last ten years have shown considerable expansion, in both Asian and European areas; a positive sign of growing local demand. Nationally, however, the proportion of university students undertaking language study remains far too low (some estimates put it at less than 2 percent). With the right kind of support—from public and private sectors—Australia should be able to emulate Europe’s success in developing real large-scale multilingual capacity.

(5) Chinese teaching in China: coals to Newcastle?

The world’s largest and most successful provider of Chinese language course via distance education is located in an Australian university. The market focuses on non-Chinese residents in China who need to develop their language skills. Distance
provision from Australia has proven to be no handicap. Australia is well positioned—given the quality of its university sector, its technological capability and language skills—to provide precisely this sort of service internationally for a range of languages in the Asia-Pacific region.

(6) American Model of Global Language Capacity

One of the secrets of American success in the world is the understanding that having citizens who are experts in the languages and cultures spoken around the world is of vital strategic importance to the interests of the United States. A number of initiatives are in place to achieve and maintain this language capacity in the very long term. These include guaranteed national funding of smaller languages (including a permanent national trust fund). American focus is very broad-ranging, highly strategic and covers international, national, regional and local languages.

With very few exceptions, practically all national languages in the world are taught somewhere in the American university system. In the case of the Philippines the national language Pilipino (Tagalog) is widely taught, and two regional languages, Ilocano and Cebuano, are also available in American universities. Although the Philippines has some 60 million inhabitants, and is located close to Australia in the Asia-Pacific region, Australia has no university level language provision.

By way of further example, Brigham Young University in Utah offers 54 languages. University of Michigan—in the geographical centre of the US-Canada region and therefore furthest away from both Asia, and Europe—offers only 27 languages: Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, Czech, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi-Urdu, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Tagalog, Tamil, Thai, Turkish, Vietnamese, and Yiddish.

(7) The Importance of Language Skills in the Market: Selling Wine to Japan

Under the heading 'Wine sits well on a foreign tongue', The Australian (17 July 2001) recently reported on one young Australian working in the wine export industry. Relying on her Japanese language skills first developed at university, this Australian, working for one company, and based in Japan, has the specific task of increasing the Australian share of national wine sales in Japan from 4 percent to 10 percent.

(8) The Importance of Intercultural Understanding

The focus to this point has been largely on the benefits of language to human capital. We should not forget the real, positive outcomes language learning and multilingualism bring to international understanding. UNESCO has long recognized the benefits of language teaching through initiatives such as Linguapax. In 1999 UNESCO formally endorsed multilingualism as an essential outcome for all citizens of the world. It specifically accepted as an objective that all students leaving school should have ‘... a working knowledge of three languages—which should represent the normal range of practical linguistic skills in the twenty-first century’.
In Conclusion: Our Multilingual Future

None of the facts or opinions expressed here should be taken as controversial. The shift back to multilingualism in the western world seems fairly evident. It’s the opposing view presuming the supremacy of English that is overstated. Even if it were true, it is a dangerous notion to accept, since it so clearly runs the risk as it has in the UK of making us complacent. Fortunately Australian government and business have had greater and longer foresight, and have already begun the long process of pushing towards the expansion of Australia’s multilingual and multicultural skills in the international arena. But ongoing and increasing public and private support in favour of our national language capability remains vital to Australia’s well-being in the future.

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