

Veronica Bryant (00:11):

Hello and welcome to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's Podcasts on issues affecting higher education. I'm Veronica Bryant, ACTA's Academic Affairs Fellow. And today I'm joined by Marie Kawthar Daouda, a fellow at Ralston College in Savannah and a Stipendiary Lecturer in French at Oriel College, Oxford. She is the author of many articles and monographs and has just recently published a book called Not Your Victim: How Our Obsession with Race Entraps and Divides Us, which is out with Polity Press. Welcome to the podcast, Marie.

Marie Daouda (00:51):

Thank you for having me, Veronica.

Veronica Bryant (00:53):

First of all, I'm not sure you may be the first guest who's joining us from England, at least in a long time on Higher Ed Now. I'd love to get your perspective on America and perceptions of America across the pond, particularly on the subject of America as perhaps the only monolingual country in the West, arguably. Perhaps Britain might join us with that status as well, but certainly Americans perceive ourselves as being the butt of cultural jokes over in Europe. Is this a real perception? Are we right to think this? Are we too proudly monolingual? What do y'all think over there?

Marie Daouda (01:41):

I think you opened the report with that wonderful joke about, well, how do you call a person who only speaks one language? An American. And technically there's the same prejudice going on about the British people, the idea that when a Brit lands in a European country, the way to be understood is just to say things very loud in English again and again and again until someone understands what you're saying. True, it's the sort of Emily in Paris cliché of someone landing in a foreign country and expecting that everyone will speak their language. The impression I have is that people are much more culturally aware than that and at least try. So I'd say that there is actually a lot more interest in languages, be it only from the sort of language enthusiasm, not necessarily learning a language, but one thing I've noticed about Americans is that if you tell them you are confident in two languages, they're amazed.

(02:42):

If it's more than two, then, "Wow, how do you do it?" But I suppose in countries where the national language is not, I'd say as culturally widespread. So if you think, for instance, of the Netherlands, Portugal, Italy, young people tend to pick up English very quickly, not necessarily because of how it's taught in school, but largely because of cultural influence. So everyone enjoys watching, I don't know, American films or even BBC TV shows. So there's an exposure to English that I'd say on the other side of the pond or on the other side of the channel, people don't necessarily benefit from. So it's a bit sad that someone whose native language is English would actually, contrary to the Emily in Paris cliché, learn somewhere in the world everyone is eager to speak English with that person just to practice, which is, well, not the best way for Americans or British citizens to get their French practice or their Spanish practice when they're on vacation.

(03:44):

What I've noticed, well, mainly with my students when they're on their year abroad, is that if they want to make friends with young Parisians of their age, it won't actually help them develop their French. It's largely the French kids who'll end up practicing their English, so it goes the other way around. But I think there's also a very strong generational problem here because I know that the boomers have a very bad rap at the moment, but one thing that has massively changed over the last 30 years is that with online communication, people are actually much more aware that there are places in the world that are not like

theirs. So the idea of American insularity too is, well, one of the negative cliches about the United States, but in practice, it is not the case. So you see many young people who are very interested in either European cultures, Eastern cultures, African cultures, and all of that happens through online exposure.

(04:40):

And it creates a very different perception of the value of language, the value of language acquisition, as well from what we would have had one generation ago where language was just your means to communicate with specific people.

Veronica Bryant (04:53):

That's fantastic. And I'm glad to hear that there's a little bit of empathy, at least for those of us that have native level knowledge of languages that most of the world is trying to learn as a second or third or fifth language. You specifically have quite a range of personal exposure to languages, as well as professionally. I think it could be really interesting for our audience to hear a little bit more about your personal story, how you came to be teaching French, where you came from, and any aspects of your language learning experience and language teaching experience that you think would be interesting to share.

Marie Daouda (05:33):

Absolutely. Well, I was born and raised in Morocco. I am a Moroccan. The language that we speak at home, well, it would be labeled as Moroccan Arabic, which is actually quite different from formal Arabic. So I'd say that's the language that is shared at home in the street, that's what is spoken. But I also come from a family that was very interested in French culture. Well, I started speaking French before I started speaking Moroccan Arabic. So it was sort of weird mixture of both languages, although my mother did not want my brother and I to have too many interferences. So we were asked to say a whole sentence in French or a whole sentence in Moroccan Arabic and not mix and match between the two. However, by teenage, we would use two languages in one sentence or even three. So it was just, if there's a word that comes naturally in Spanish, would you use that one?

(06:27):

And I think it's just a sort of connection to language that is really not linked to borders or I say ethnical belonging or land belonging. The idea is that languages are more of a flow. They come and go between generations, between different people. So when I left Morocco to study in France, my spoken languages, I'd say, were Moroccan Arabic and French. My more, I'd say academic languages were English and Spanish. So I landed in France with that linguistic baggage. And one thing that is probably worth mentioning is that knowing one or two romance languages is a very easy way to learn all the others. So now I'd say I could read Portuguese, I could have a conversation in Italian, but with a native speaker because of that sort of tiny wedge of having French and Spanish as a basis. And a paradoxical thing in my education is that I did not actually study Latin when I was in secondary school, but I developed an interest for it quite early on.

(07:31):

So I took it when I was in university, but it was more of a sort of a language nerdism than anything else. The languages are labeled as ancient languages aren't the ones you'll be using when traveling or when chatting with someone you've just met. But there is something inherently interesting just seeing how they work, how they have shaped the languages that we speak today. So I'd say Latin has also been very helpful for me to understand a bit more about the structures of other languages, but paradoxically, it has also helped me understand formal literary Moroccan Arabic because of how the grammar works. So we tend to think of languages as different bubbles that don't really communicate with one another, but in terms of skills and not just the linguistic skills, but the skills of reflection, the skills of analyzing how words work, how you build a sentence, I think that has been actually very, very helpful.

[\(08:26\)](#):

And not just in terms of, well, now I could pretty much read confidently many different languages that's sort of niche, slightly creepy interest. But whenever you discover a new language, it makes you think about your own language. It makes you think about the way you use words. And more broadly, it makes you think of all the means of communication that won't necessarily be put in the native language, foreign language category, but just the way we communicate. Physical communication or the way someone's facial expressions could convey things or the way we say each family has its own language because there are words that you would use that would acquire a different meaning and only your tiny circle knows what it is. Couples work a lot like that. Each couple has its own language and friendships too have their language.

Veronica Bryant [\(09:19\)](#):

What you said there reminded me of a poem by Dana Gioia, talks about that his wife and he have their own language that will go extinct when one of them dies. That's just a fascinating concept.

Marie Daouda [\(09:33\)](#):

That's wonderful. I'd have to ask you about the references for that poem, but it's an experience that people have a lot now. And if I could link it to the very sad experience of being ghosted, a friend disappears and you get no signal. It's not just the person, it's the whole language that you had with that person. And it's a part of your own language that is gone because who is going to understand that tiny inside joke that you had with your high school friend and now she doesn't talk to you anymore and that's it. The roads have parted, but you can't rekindle that, but you are left with this language that you can't speak with anyone anymore. So in a way, being exposed to different languages is not just a matter of linguistic skills and training. I think it informs very deeply who we are as persons, how we relate to one another, how we understand one another and the efforts we make to communicate beyond the strange incomprehensibility of any individual. We try to bridge the gaps and it's through languages that we do that.

Veronica Bryant [\(10:36\)](#):

That's right. Also, if I may, it's world building too. So you mentioned friendships, you build a little world with these friends. I think that's why the Tower of Babel image is so lasting because it's not just really about a tower that they're building that's at the center of the city, that's the center of the world to bring down the language unity is bringing down the power of the world building that they're trying to achieve there in negative ways, in their context. But I think it can be reclaimed for in positive ways, as I'm sure we'll get to. And as you've been alluding to here, I think your story dovetails nicely with one of the things that I observe in the report, which is this massive explosion of multilingual or at least bilingual Americans largely due to immigration. Between the years of 1980 and 2019, there has been nearly a tripling of individuals who speak another language other than English, perhaps along with English though, in their household, that number going from 23.1 million to 67.8 million.

[\(11:49\)](#):

And in case anyone thinks that's comparable to the United States population growth in that period, by no means, the United States population growth in the same period was only 47%. So it's a huge difference. And it's a big question. We have this great resource of people that speak a very wide range of languages in this country. Our language is now officially English. It didn't used to be just English, but it was always unofficially English, I think, we can safely say. The question is, how can we communicate with, how can we build with this massive multilingual population in a way that integrates them into our nation, into our culture. And yeah, I use the instrumental term leverage, but really, again, cooperate with them and recognize the value that having those additional languages can bring to the nation. The report talks

something about this, but I'm sure you have had much experience in teaching and not just in learning languages that you could talk about as well professionally.

Marie Daouda ([12:58](#)):

Absolutely. What you've pointed out about American population and it's, how do I put that? Almost it's organic multilingualism. I think we can date that back to the first settlements. And for many centuries, there were pockets of people speaking Dutch, people speaking German, people speaking French. So in a way, the complexities of history have made it so that English became the dominant language in the United States. That's what happened through history now that is the fact. And if history had gone the other way and I don't know, Napoleon decided to conquer the United States, the United States would be speaking French. So in a way, these historical events have shaped our connection to language as well. But I think during the recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the need both for a common language in order to encourage this sense of belonging, rootedness, being part of a specific country and doing things together, even though we might come from different places.

([14:01](#)):

And that's so deeply rooted in the very idea of the United States, how the United States became to happen. And I remember when I first landed in a Texan airport, my first surprise was, "Oh, there are signs in Spanish here." So all of a sudden my Spanish was rekindled. I thought, well, this is super interesting. This is extremely telling about the geographical position of Texas, of course, and it's very complex history as a state. But now when you hear about how that impacts education, quite often you'd have school teachers being very explicit about how difficult it is to teach in a classroom where some of the kids have barely any exposure to English at all at home. So how do you integrate them? How do you teach them? And I have an immense admiration for the teachers who do that work of just giving this sense of linguistic belonging to the children by giving them exposure to language.

([15:01](#)):

At the same time, not speaking English doesn't mean that they don't have a linguistic and cultural heritage that they come in with. So sometimes you have almost a sort of cliché of the noble savage, oh, they don't speak English, therefore they don't know anything, which is a bit absurd because someone who speaks Spanish virtually has access to an immense culture. So it's not just the Spain-Iberic culture from Europe, but also the different local Latin American cultures, how they got mixed with other local Indian pre-Colombian languages. So it is in fact a huge heritage. Perhaps a good way to deal with that would be not only providing the children with the competence in English that will make them confident citizens, but also value what their language already gives them access to. In a way, it might be a great possibility, a great wealth culturally to make the most of the language skills of these students, these children who do have that language at home, but who probably feel not confident enough to advertise their heritage or talk about it in a positive way.

([16:12](#)):

So that's something that I discuss in my new book, *Not Your Victim*, how our obsession with race and traps and divides us. The idea that what makes someone not Western should be seen as something negative. It's just racism under a new shape. So there's no reason why we would look down on these children just because their first language isn't English and there are many ways of looking down on someone and sometimes having the opposite attitude of providing the Spanish-only teaching schools and things like that that would not necessarily give the students or the children the depth and immersion in American culture that they would need. That too is a very difficult question. So in a way, we really have to encourage a positive race of the linguistic potential that these children come with.

Veronica Bryant ([17:05](#)):

Yes. And as you rightly said, the civilizational backgrounds that they can unlock through that linguistic potential or through that language, could you speak a little bit more as to how at Oxford or other teaching positions you've had, you have found that language teaching can unlock some of that cultural background that we've been talking about, whether it's with students who are native speakers of the language that you are teaching or perhaps speakers of another language.

Marie Daouda ([17:40](#)):

So my first experience in teaching language actually was teaching English when I was in France. So I used to author, well, tutorials, remedial English teaching when I was a student. And one thing that I realized then was first how strong the English speaking soft power was because it was very easy to look at a grammatical point by listening to a song. So there was one song in particular that I really liked because it had lots of phrasal verbs in it. So when you're French, you don't have phrasal verbs, so it's a good way to see how one tiny proposition can change the whole meaning of the word. So I think that was one of my first professional exposures to how tricky it is to explain these linguistic singularities. And in France, I was mainly teaching French literature to high school pupils, high school students.

([18:36](#)):

And one thing though that they had to learn was how to write in proper French. So I think in most English-speaking countries, there's a sort of organic understanding of language. It's your own language, you don't need to teach to learn it in a way. The French had a very different approach to that because there's a lot more formal grammar. So you'd have to know what is the subject, what is the verb, what's the object, what are the relative pronouns, all these technicalities that allow you to master the hows of the linguistic instruction. And when I moved to Britain and started teaching French to English native speakers, the first thing I noticed is how different their exposure to formal learning of language was. And that's also when I realized how much they learned about English when we talked about French grammar. So it was an interesting reverse situation of teaching the students how to translate a text, let's say, from French into English and getting to think of actually how the English language works.

([19:44](#)):

So in a way that was a very interesting experience because what it unlocked was not so much a hidden locked up potential, but just a growing awareness of all the things that they could do with language, whether they chose this word or that word, whether they constructed a sentence in that way or that other way, it would bear a different meaning. And it is through their exposure to French that they discovered that. And another thing that I realized is, in fact, how much more the students are interested in the culture than the language itself. So the language becomes the means through which one unlocks a different culture. And quite often we'd have students, and it's not just the case in Oxford. In most British universities I've been familiar with, the students do not learn the language just because they want the same translation skills as an artificial intelligence translation device.

([20:44](#)):

They want the language skills because they want to bring that together with a whole cultural knowledge, a whole cultural valuing of a place that is different from their own. So this awareness of the difference, but in an extremely positive way is something that I think is so crucial nowadays, and the debate seems so fraught between belonging, not belonging, who is it that belongs. The idea of just being aware that other people do have a culture and these cultures are extremely rich, and we cannot access them if we do not have at least an awareness of how their language works. I think that's so essential if we think of the students of today being the decision makers of tomorrow, someone who only knows, well, I'd say French, German grammar, does not know France or Germany. It takes a lot more than having the grammar book in one's head in order to understand and appreciate a country.

Veronica Bryant ([21:43](#)):

Yes. And in your experience with teaching in a national literature type department or perhaps just talking to colleagues, in other words, not your direct experience, do you find it a challenge to balance the teaching of that grammar, the formal aspects of language and the more cultural civilizational aspects?

Marie Daouda (22:08):

Well, I think actually they work wonderfully well together because let's say if we take the example of French and English, which are the ones I'm most familiar with, when one speaks English, and that's very clear, if you look at any Shakespeare play, because Shakespeare is a master of that, you have both the Latin roots of words that come from Latin and the words that come from Germanic Dermanic roots. And it's the contrast between the two that allow you to have two different ways of saying so many things in English. So if you think, for instance, of ghost and spirit, I think it's probably Gerthia Lorka who was talking about the fact that when you say ghost, you feel the dark depth of the Anglo-Saxon atmosphere. And when you say spirit, you have light evanescent Mediterranean aspect of something that could seem linguistically interchangeable. So of course, these are subjective perceptions and they do not supersede the linguistic analyzes element.

(23:14):

But when looking at how the French and English language have these words in common through the Latin roots, but also what is absolutely special about English words or words in English that derive either from a Germanic or a Danish root. In fact, when you look at these, you have access not just to the French, the German culture, the Latin culture, you have access to British culture itself, all the complex ways of invasion, et cetera. So all the words that have a K-N, for instance, well, they have Danish origins, the words that have JHT, usually they would have this English accent, but much more Germanic origin to them. And the words that have a Latin root would have come either through Latin directly or through French with the Norman conquest. So here again, we see that the linguistic aspect and the cultural aspect are deeply connected and they're also rooted in the realities of history.

(24:15):

So nowadays you're reading any book in English, you see English history unfolding just through the language. And for someone who I'd say learns a language in order to read a book in the original that unlocks an aspect that you really don't have when you read something just through translation, even if one isn't a very confident reader, at least you see what the words look like. You can imagine in your head what they sound like, and it's a very different experience from reading the text translated into one's language. So I think that's a very interesting aspect of these cultural connections that are manifested through language.

Veronica Bryant (24:57):

Fascinating. This reminds me a little bit of a talk that Bishop Eric Varden gave for First Things on translation and its value. He's not alone in talking about this concept, but he talks about how he personally was deeply struck in first opening a German book, and that's how he learned German, through German literature as a non-native speaker, because he needed to go... He found he was really getting back to the source too. In his case, he felt like he was getting all the way to Latin through German, interestingly. He uses this concept of [foreign language 00:25:34]. I think that's something that many people are trying to capture when they learn a language. And I know you and I have talked specifically about the value of trying to learn a language or really trying to learn an author, trying to learn a specific work of literature or philosophy through learning the language that you could read that author, that work in the original.

(25:58):

I think the same could be true for what we're seeing with this massive growth in Korean language learning. I think both in the UK and the US, brands that one language whose enrollments are just growing tremendously, 38% in five years from 2016 to 2021, unlike every other foreign language, which was in

decline at that same period. And that's maybe not so much about Korean books as it might be about film and music, but certainly there's a deep desire to access the very roots of a culture through its language. So I don't know if you'd want to share a little bit about your passion for Dostoevsky, for instance, and what that may have prompted you or not to do.

Marie Daouda ([26:47](#)):

Well, I have a passionate relationship with Dostoevsky because I cannot yet read him in Russian, but I can decipher Russian, which I wanted to do at least in order to be able to identify the words that he uses. That's what I was referring to earlier as reading into the original, just to see what the words are supposed to sound like. One thing that prompted that was actually that I came across a very disappointing translation. I had heard someone referring to a passage in the Brothers Karamadzov with the idea of, I think that the phrase that was quoted was humility is a terrible strength, is a formidable strength. And so I had heard that in French, I wanted to find it in Russian, but I wanted to find it first in English and then in Russian, because what I found in English was a very pale translation, which was the love of humanity is a great power, which if you know a bit the context of Dostoevsky, at first, it doesn't make any sense with Dostoevsky, but also it doesn't make any sense with what I had heard in French.

([27:56](#)):

Therefore, I had to ask a friend who is French, but speaks Russian. I had to ask him to retrieve the original, and he told me that in fact, the words that were used in Russian were even stronger than just humility is a formidable strength. So I think that explains a lot of what we see today with young people wanting to access their K-pop song or their Korean drama in the original, because there's always something lost in translation. So here again, it's not about being absolutely fluent. It's not about being a linguist expert in the language, but at least having some exposure to how different things are in the original. But the example of Korea is so fascinating because it didn't happen through any big state national policy of now we have to get the kids to learn Korean. It just happened through soft power and young people actually being extremely interested in learning a language if it gives them access to a content that they enjoy.

([29:00](#)):

And I suppose this could happen to anyone with any language, but the added dimension in Korean is that it was an extremely online phenomenon. So I suppose young people also, well, emulate one another because once one has started learning the original songs in Korean, then the other one wants to do it, the other one wants to do it. And you have a wonderful chain reaction and communities of Western teenagers who are confident in Korean, because that gives them access to that culture that they are interested in. And I'm not sure we should have a sort of a highbrow, low brow distinction and think it's just K-pop or whatever. It is language after all. And I was talking earlier about the importance of American or British pop music for European teenagers exposure to the spoken language. It's something that has been pervasive, and I think it's probably the way the Cold War ended with people on the other side of the Iron Curtain just wanting to listen to these American rock songs.

([30:07](#)):

And I think today we have completely lost the subversive power of learning a language that is not the one shared in your country, just having this sort of connection with a culture that is on the other side of the border. So we take the fluidity across borders for granted so much so that we don't realize there were certain moments when speaking this or that language was not just frowned upon, but could have been seen as political crime. So it's something that we should probably be very grateful for that today we have so many possibilities of acquiring a language. And we see that in the fact that Jolingo, for instance, has become a hobby. So you can play Candy Crush or you can do your Jolingo. And the fact that people could put in their free time in learning a language is so fascinating. They don't get any immediate reward for it.

(31:01):

They don't get professional advancement. It's just, well, I decided I'm going to learn Korean, German, French, whatever. And what starts as an individual choice then becomes an entry into a whole community of either second language speakers or first language speakers. And that's such a wonderful thing that we then benefit from today.

Veronica Bryant (31:21):

Well, that's fantastic. You mentioned, and I think I did too, that there's cultural values, civilizational value even in discussing not just pets, but also things like music, television movies, and even informal spoken culture outside of those things to an extent. I think it seems like this is a theme in your scholarship itself. I noticed you wrote an article that I'm personally interested in called [inaudible 00:31:52] about Wagnerian novels in France in the late 19th century. Just thinking about the intersection between literature, obviously Wagner is maybe a special case, but the intersection between literature, music, all the arts I think is really interesting. And in some ways echoes the intersection among languages and cultures that you were talking about earlier too. But certainly the effect of Wagner on other cultures, he's deeply, deeply German, but clearly he had an impact on many people across the world really, and still does.

Marie Daouda (32:32):

Wagner is quite illustrative of the power of German culture in the 19th century. So one thing to bear in mind is that the moment enthusiasm about Germany started in Europe was in the direct aftermath of the French Revolution. So the universalist ideas of the Revolution had as a whiplash effect, the fact that countries became aware that they had things that were proper to them that were not universal, that they were rooted in space, time. So after the French Revolution, two key figures of this renewal of interest in Germany were the brother Grim, the Grim brothers of the fairytales, originally they were linguists and they collected fairytales in order to look at the connections between folklore and language. So they would record these different versions of a fairytale, how it's spoken, how it's said in this region, how it's said in that other region. And what they did in fact triggered quite a huge amount of enthusiasm in France.

(33:38):

So a bit before the Grim Brothers, we had Madam de Stael, Germaine de Stael, actual called Germaine, and she wrote an essay entitled [foreign language 00:33:49] of Germany, in which she writes, [foreign language 00:33:53] so one must have a European spirit, which sounds so much like what you'd hear today about unity between nations, all of that. But what she meant by that is that Europe has a diversity of cultures and also overarching themes, but [foreign language 00:34:12] have the European spirit for her was to be aware of the common points, but also the differences. So she was extremely enthusiastic about Germany. Stendhal too was very fond of Germany. So that's the climate in which Wagner was received in France. Some artists like Baudelaire were very enthusiastic about Wagner. Others were really not that keen on him. [inaudible 00:34:42] notoriously hated Wagner. He thought that it was just a madman locking people in a dark room while other people are yelling on the stage. He has one of the best anti-Wagnerian essays. But the interesting thing about Wagner is that as you were saying, he's deeply German.

(34:57):

He delved into a heritage that is much more on the north of Europe than the conventional classical Greek Latin heritage that France is more part of. But the paradoxical thing is that in 1870 when Prussia invaded France, there was a very strong anti-Wagnerian reaction because people realized, well, no, these Prussians, they're not like us. And they went back to their own either Celtic or Latin heritage and rejected the Frankish because Frank is too German-adjacent. So there was a very strong understanding that even within France, you have the North that is Germanic, Frank, et cetera, and the South, which is the actual civilization because of the Greek and Roman heritage, but also some authors who deliberately took the

Northern side. So Joris-Karl Huysmans who wrote that novel called *À rebours*, *Against the Grain* was in fact, well, he is one of the ones who deserted during the 1870s war.

(36:04):

And there's a hilarious passage in [inaudible 00:36:07] down there, a novel where he talks about Joan of Arc and Gilles de Rais, et cetera. The way he says that Joan of Arc has created and absurd France uniting the North and the South and the North, well, is for him the place that is civilized and enlightened and polite, et cetera. And the South is just, how does he call them? Chewers of corn and munchers of cocoa beans. It's very interesting when we think of how long it takes for a country to have a sense of unity within its borders. I think that's a very good example of how aware one might be of the differences in a specific country. And Italy chose a fascinating example for that because before the reunification, what is now called slightly derogatively Italian dialects were just the local languages of each part, and then comes in the unification and the idea that now you will have the formal Florentine Italian as the base language for everyone.

Veronica Bryant (37:09):

Given the fact that there is such a capacity for unification through language, like the case of Italy gives as an example, like you mentioned early on with the case of the Hispanic world, both in Spanish, and I think to some extent in the Anglosphere, we talk about something called a Hispanic world. Obviously there are many cultures within a community of language speakers, but nonetheless, there is something unifying about languages. Do you see language learning then as a unifying aspect, learning other languages as a unifying aspect to a culture, a nation, frankly, such as the UK or as mine, as the United States? And specifically, I'm thinking about your new book, *Not Your Victim*. You're talking about the concerns you have about division on the issue of race, which thinking of Wagner just now.

(38:10):

In fact, in Spanish, there's an allusion between the term race and ethnicity, and ethnicity meaning nation actually. So people that speak a language. I guess this is a long way of saying physical race, biological race, skin color is one thing that people see as a dividing factor and does it need to be? I don't think so. And language is another, so that's a communicative aspect, a cognitive thing that people see as a dividing factor among peoples. Do you see that learning a foreign language as a native speaker of your home country's language is something that can unify your country, even though some people might see it as more of a fragmented thing?

Marie Daouda (39:00):

Well, one thing that we have to bear in mind is that language and politics have been united. So to give you two examples, during the French Revolution, because there wasn't that identity factor of just being subject of the King anymore, the first thing that the revolutionaries, the Republican revolutionaries wanted to do was to unify the language. They wanted everyone to speak French, I think Central Parisian, Toranjo French across the whole territory, which meant that places like Brittany, for instance, that were nominally French, but had their own language, were forced to give up on their language. And the typical punishment for speaking Britain in school was to be tapped on the finger with a ruler. So if you spoke that language in school, then that was very, very bad. Paradoxically, sometimes the language can be a vector of unification when it is solely needed. So if we take India, for instance, where I think officially about a little under 30 languages, but practically more than 200 different languages are spoken, technically the use of English as official language should have ended 20 years ago.

(40:21):

It has been maintained because once there isn't this overarching agreement on English, what it gives way to is lots of tribal tensions, some languages, so Hindi, for instance, wanting supremacy over other languages, Gujarati, et cetera. So in a way, having English as a possible official language is a good way to

step aside from these local tensions that could arise from having so much fragmentation of language. But when it comes to learning a foreign language in order to create unity in one's own country, I think the key factor is the level of cultural awareness that it gives just in terms of humanity, humanity as the singular for humanities. We tend to see the learning of languages from a very practical point of view, which I think misses the point because it ends up only making languages in danger of being obsolete as a subject. But one thing that you clearly notice among students of foreign languages is that they are much more likely to be open to debate, open to different positions, open to just the fact that someone across the border might disagree with you for very valid reasons.

(41:45):

So instead of seeing someone who, well, that person who disagrees as either stupid or dangerous, this person is just a human being with a different opinion that might also be rooted in factual information that has to be addressed too. So there is humanizing aspect of learning languages, not just because it gives you another way of thinking about your own language, but because it gives you access to civilizations that have dealt with similar or different issues in very different ways. And it's a great lesson in humility, so to speak. So we started the conversation talking about the monolingual aspect of the Anglosphere. Perhaps a great way to go beyond the binaries and political polarization is to be aware that other countries, other civilizations also have a very complex history with lots of crime and violence in it. And it's something that you can only do if you acknowledge that their history is carried by languages that you have to be open to.

(42:52):

So going back to the caricature of the noble savage, once you learn, I don't know, about Korean history and realize that, well, yes, Koreans have practiced slavery too, but it was not nice, North Africa, the Arab slave trade, all of these things that we don't really talk about in history because we don't have access to the original sources. We don't really care about the original material. But once you start thinking about it, you would think, so maybe we should take a step back in our current political debates and try to have a way of talking about these questions that is really inclusive and that doesn't use inclusiveness just as a political tool to create even more divisions by having this permanent binary, we, the others, one world, the other world. I think actually language learning is a great way to go beyond the political divides that you can see in different countries.

Veronica Bryant (43:49):

I'm sure that's part of the motivation, a large part of the motivation of the Esperanto movement, which didn't work out all that [inaudible 00:43:56] I think largely because the artificial nature of the thing, I think as you stated, the learning of an organic natural language that's linked to a peoples, cultures, and going back to the roots of that population is huge in terms of getting to the value of what makes us all human. And I appreciated very much that you mentioned humanity there and humanities you even pointed to because really the roots of university education are in many ways language learning or at least using languages to get to a deep understanding of text, yes, but also speaking in the original languages of those texts in Latin, even when Latin wasn't the native language of those people that were learning at the university, in order to fully immerse oneself in the ideas, in the framework, the worldview of the authors that one was engaging with.

(44:50):

And again, that does get to universal questions and universal issues, both the strengths and weaknesses of us as humans. So hopefully pointing to some of the more inclusive aspects, as you state, of language learning will make universities or will help universities realize their value. And instead of shuttering language departments or cutting down on language departments first when they're considering budget cuts, perhaps they'll see the value that they can bring to all other departments.

Marie Daouda ([45:21](#)):

One thing that we've noticed about modern languages degrees is that in fact, they have the highest employability rate in Oxford. In other universities, they do have a significantly high employability rate, and they don't necessarily lead to jobs in translation, communications, things like that. Sometimes it's towards diplomacy, education, not necessarily in language and sometimes civil service, because we do need people who are culturally aware of the differences. So the cliché that learning a language won't get you anywhere is factually erroneous. So even from a pragmatic perspective, universities would do well in not closing their language degrees. However, this has to take into account the necessity of real high quality teaching. So not just something that is delivering grammar textbooks one after the other, but also taking into account the students' interests, a real openness towards the world present and past. So an acknowledgement of the long continuity of the linguistic variety that we're surrounded with.

Veronica Bryant ([46:31](#)):

Beautiful, Marie. I've had a lovely time speaking with you today. Thank you for joining us.

Marie Daouda ([46:37](#)):

Likewise. Didn't feel like a podcast. So when are you coming over for tea or something?

Doug Sprei ([46:59](#)):

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