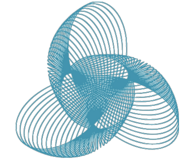

Deera Editorial

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Linguistic Neurogenesis and Politics

On 27 June 1995, three days after the Springboks defeated New Zealand at Ellis Park, a journalist asked Nelson Mandela where he had learned to speak Afrikaans well enough to address the captain François Pienaar in his own language. Mandela's answer was that he had begun studying Afrikaans on Robben Island in the 1960s, three decades before he would need it. His fellow prisoners had teased him about it; the language of the warder seemed an odd thing for a freedom fighter to learn. Mandela's reasoning, recorded years later by Richard Stengel, was characteristically clear: he knew that one day he would be either fighting Afrikaners or negotiating with them, and either way his destiny was tied to theirs (Stengel). The Afrikaans he learned in a prison cell would, three decades later, contribute to the single most important act of national reconciliation in modern African history. This article is about why.

The argument that follows is not that learning languages makes politicians better. It is the more interesting claim that the cognitive process of managing more than one language reshapes the brain in ways that have specific, measurable consequences for political competence — for negotiation, for rapport, for the kind of perspective-taking that makes coalition-building possible across deep cultural divides. The neuroscience is real. The historical record is striking. The two literatures rarely speak to one another. They should.

I. THE BRAIN UNDER LANGUAGE

Adult human brains are not, as the educational orthodoxy of the early twentieth century once held, fixed structures. They are living tissue under constant revision by experience. This property — neuroplasticity — is most visible in the regions recruited heavily by sustained practice: the motor cortex of a violinist, the hippocampus of a London taxi driver, the auditory cortex of a tonal-language speaker. The phenomenon Deera refers to in this article as *linguistic*

neurogenesis is a particular case of this broader plasticity: the structural and functional changes in the brain that follow from the lifelong management of two or more languages. The term is used here in its broad sense, to encompass the increased gray-matter density, the strengthened white-matter tracts, and the restructured executive-control networks that decades of research have now documented in bilingual and multilingual populations.

The single most influential body of work on this question belongs to Ellen Bialystok of York University. In a research program spanning more than three decades, Bialystok and her collaborators have shown that bilingualism is associated with measurable advantages on tasks that require attention, inhibition of irrelevant information, and the rapid switching of mental frames (Bialystok, Craik, and Luk 240). Bilingual children resolve conflicting cues faster than their monolingual peers; bilingual adults outperform monolinguals on tests that demand sustained selective attention in noisy environments. The mechanism, in the dominant theoretical account, is that the bilingual brain is constantly inhibiting the language not currently in use, and this constant practice in inhibition strengthens the frontal-lobe networks responsible for executive control more generally (Bialystok 234).

The most striking finding in this literature, however, concerns the lifespan. Bilingualism is now associated with a delay of approximately four to five years in the clinical onset of dementia symptoms in older adults — not by preventing the underlying neuroanatomical decline, but by enabling the brain to compensate for it longer through what neuroscientists call *cognitive reserve* (Bialystok, Craik, and Luk 247). A bilingual eighty-year-old whose brain shows the same level of Alzheimer's pathology as a monolingual eighty-year-old will, on average, exhibit fewer functional symptoms. Decades of negotiating between two systems of meaning have left the brain with reserves that the disease cannot immediately deplete. The political relevance of this finding is less direct than that of the executive-function research, but the general point is the same: the bilingual brain is, in measurable ways, a different organ from the monolingual one.

What does any of this have to do with politics? The connection is the executive-function literature itself. The cognitive operations on which bilinguals show consistent advantages —

attention to a target in the context of conflicting signals, the suppression of an automatic response in favor of a context-appropriate one, the rapid switching between mental frames — are precisely the operations a politician performs in every negotiation, every committee hearing, every press conference. The skill set the bilingual brain rehearses unconsciously, in the act of choosing between two words for the same concept, is the skill set the politician deploys consciously when reading a room. This is not a metaphor. It is the same underlying neural machinery.

II. THE STATESMAN'S TONGUE

Mandela's Afrikaans was not a parlor trick. It was a strategic instrument used to dissolve, in a single sustained act of public theater, the binary that had organized South African politics for half a century. When Mandela appeared at Ellis Park in a Springbok jersey and addressed Pienaar in Afrikaans, the symbolic logic that had encoded rugby as white and Mandela as Black was no longer adequate to describe what the audience was witnessing. The president of the new South Africa, dressed in the uniform of the old, was speaking the language of the people who had imprisoned him for twenty-seven years — and was speaking it to include them in the country he had inherited (Carlin).

The journalist John Carlin, who wrote the definitive account of the rugby episode, observed that Mandela's Afrikaans was not fluent in the academic sense. It was something more useful: it was sufficient. He could open meetings in it, deliver pleasantries in it, recite lines of poetry from the Afrikaner literary canon in it. The point was never to pass as an Afrikaner; the point was to demonstrate that he had taken the trouble to step into the linguistic space the Afrikaners considered their own. That gesture, Mandela understood, would do more political work than a thousand speeches of reconciliation delivered in English. The medium of the message was the message.

The pattern is not unique to Mandela. It recurs across the historical record whenever a statesman has needed to bridge a divide that monolingual politics could not bridge. King Hassan II of Morocco, negotiating with French presidents, would shift between Classical Arabic, Moroccan Darija, French, Spanish, and English depending on the audience and the register he

intended to set. Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore mastered Mandarin, Hokkien, and Malay alongside his native English not because Singapore lacked translators, but because he understood that an audience of Hokkien-speaking voters in Tanjong Pagar would never trust a leader who could only address them through an interpreter. Pope Francis code-switches in audiences across Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and Latin, often within a single homily, calibrating his register to the national delegations seated in front of him. None of these are accidents of biography. They are deliberate cultivations of a political instrument.

III. AN OLDER TRADITION

The recognition that linguistic range translates into political power is older than modern politics. The Greek historian Plutarch, writing in the second century, recorded that Cleopatra VII of Egypt was reputed to speak “most barbarian tongues,” and that she was the first ruler of the Ptolemaic line in nearly three centuries to learn the Egyptian language of her own subjects (Plutarch, *Life of Antony* 27). Plutarch lists nine languages: Egyptian, Ethiopian, Trogodyte, Hebrew, Arabian, Syrian, Median, Parthian, and her native Greek. Whether the list is precisely accurate is less important than what it indicates about the political function of multilingualism in Hellenistic statecraft. Cleopatra ruled a kingdom whose dynastic legitimacy rested on Greek ancestry, whose population spoke Egyptian, whose commercial economy depended on the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and whose external relations were dominated by Rome and the Parthian Empire. A monoglot ruler of such a polity would have been a constitutional impossibility.

The Mughal emperor Akbar (1542-1605), who governed an empire of perhaps one hundred and ten million subjects across a religious and linguistic patchwork, made the cultivation of multilingualism into formal state policy. His court conducted business in Persian for administration, Arabic for theology, Sanskrit for engagement with the Hindu literary tradition, and Hindavi for daily commerce; Akbar himself was reportedly fluent in all four despite being technically illiterate. His capacity to engage Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Zoroastrian, and Christian religious thinkers in their own intellectual languages was the foundation of his *Sulh-i-Kul,* or

'peace with all,' the doctrine of religious tolerance that allowed his empire to govern a population more diverse than any contemporary European power could imagine.

What unites Cleopatra and Akbar across a sixteen-hundred-year gap is the recognition that legitimacy in a plural polity cannot be borrowed. It must be constructed in each linguistic register the polity contains. The ruler who speaks only the prestige language is, in effect, governing through a translator — and a translator, in politics as in poetry, is always a second author. To address a subject in his own tongue is to claim, with a credibility no decree can supply, that the relationship is direct.

IV. THE MODERN POLYGLOTS

The contemporary record contains its own catalogue of statesmen for whom multilingualism has been an explicit instrument of office. Emmanuel Macron switches between French and unaccented English with the deliberate frequency of a man who learned, early in his career, that French presidents who address Anglophone audiences in their own language earn significant goodwill while losing nothing at home. Angela Merkel, whose fluent Russian is the legacy of an East German upbringing, conducted much of her sixteen-year correspondence with Vladimir Putin in his own language — a private channel that the official translation of summit communiqués could not reproduce. Justin Trudeau's bilingualism is constitutionally required of his office; that he speaks both Canadian official languages with native fluency, rather than the stiff functional French of his predecessors, was understood by his Québécois constituency as a meaningful signal.

Closer to home, the Gulf produces statesmen whose multilingualism is the ordinary condition of their station. Senior officials across the GCC routinely operate in Arabic, English, and the diplomatic register of a third regional language — whether Persian, French, or one of the South Asian languages drawn from the labor populations they govern. The late King Hussein of Jordan delivered speeches in Arabic, English, and French — the last of these the language of the country whose mandate had created his own. In Kuwait, the leadership of the National Assembly through the negotiations of the 1990s rested in significant part on the multilingual fluency of

senior diplomats whose command of English, French, and the regional dialects of Arabic enabled them to operate simultaneously in Western capitals and in the corridors of the Arab League.

What distinguishes these figures is not, in most cases, formal linguistic training. It is the recognition — sometimes inherited, sometimes acquired by pure effort — that the politician who can address a counterpart in the counterpart's own language has begun the negotiation already advantaged. The asymmetry is structural: the monolingual interlocutor relies on the multilingual one to do the translation, and the multilingual one acquires, in that act, both the first read of the room and the final word.

V. RAPPORT, THEORY OF MIND, AND THE NEGOTIATING TABLE

The deepest political consequence of multilingualism is also the hardest to measure. It is what the developmental psychologists call *theory of mind* — the capacity to model the interior state of another person, to predict what they will believe, want, and do. Bilingual children develop theory-of-mind capacities slightly earlier than their monolingual peers, and the leading explanation is that the daily experience of choosing which language to use with which interlocutor constitutes a continuous low-grade rehearsal of perspective-taking (Goetz). A child who has spent five years deciding, dozens of times a day, whether the adult in front of her is a Spanish-speaker or an English-speaker, has been performing five years of unconscious social-cognitive practice. The same capacity, scaled to adult statecraft, is the capacity to read what an opposite number across a conference table is actually willing to accept.

There is also the matter of what linguists call *face*: the recognition, encoded differently in different languages, that every exchange between persons of unequal status carries an implicit negotiation about dignity. To address a Japanese counterpart using the wrong honorific is to communicate something different from the message the words themselves carry. To open a negotiation in Arabic with the appropriate religious salutation, or to close one in Spanish with the particular formality of *quedo a sus órdenes*, is to demonstrate, before any substantive content has been exchanged, that the interlocutor has been recognized in the register they expected. Multilingual politicians know this in their bones, because they have been performing the

calculation since childhood. Monolingual politicians must learn it, if at all, from staff briefings.

None of this is to suggest that fluency in many languages produces wisdom. It does not. Multilingual demagogues are as old as multilingual diplomats, and the same neural capacities that enable a Mandela to build rapport across a divide enable a Goebbels to manipulate audiences in more than one register at once. The cognitive instrument is morally neutral. What the historical record suggests, however, is that the instrument itself is real, that it is rare, and that the leaders who have wielded it deliberately have, on average, been more successful at the specific tasks of plural-society governance than those who have not.

VI. CONCLUSION

The question for any politician operating in the early twenty-first century — in a Gulf increasingly defined by labor populations from South Asia, the Levant, and the Horn of Africa; in a Europe absorbing demographic shifts that its postwar political language was not built to describe; in a global diplomatic environment whose lingua franca is now shared by over a billion non-native speakers — is no longer whether multilingualism is useful. It plainly is. The question is whether the political class will treat it as the rare and cultivated instrument the historical record suggests it has always been, or as a decorative biographical detail. Mandela learned Afrikaans in a prison cell because he understood that a future in which he negotiated peace with the speakers of that language was the only future worth having. The cognitive rewiring that enabled the Ellis Park moment was a thirty-year project. It was, in the end, a sound investment of a life.

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