

Grieving the Loss of My Language: Poetry Recitation Opening Remarks

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Welcome, everybody, and thank you very much for your presence here today. My name is Yael and, together with Mariona, I am the co-organiser of this event, which focuses on the painful experience of language grief, as articulated in endangered language poetry. The poetry recitation is going to be at the heart of the event. But before we proceed with the first poem, please allow me a few brief words on what motivated this event, and some of the things we have discovered in the process of planning and organizing it.

The idea to focus on the experience of language grief, specifically through endangered language poetry, was born last fall, as part of the Residency in Linguistic Rights at the Faber residence in arts, sciences and humanities in Olot, Catalonia. In one of the residency sessions, which focused on the language ethics that underlies formal and official policies aiming to protect linguistic minorities, our group delved more deeply into the philosophical questions that arise from unequal power relations between linguistic communities. In particular, the discussion focused on power asymmetries that are the result of historical domination, suppression and elimination efforts, whose lasting impacts are still enduring today around the world.

In order to gain a better sense of the painful experience of language grief, both individual and communal, the materials used by the group were not academic studies but rather a collection of poems from around the world. Those poems, like the ones that will be recited today, share a profound sense of isolation, loss and pain, arising often from extreme and deliberate violence perpetrated on linguistic minorities, and denying them of what is perhaps the most basic moral foundation of the linguistic human condition: their equal linguistic dignity.

This denial of equal linguistic dignity, in the form of language minoritization, erosion and deprivation, takes an immense emotional toll on individuals and communities, in denying them the many forms of wellbeing and relief which speakers of powerful languages often take for granted. For example, being able to participate as equal in social and political meaning-making and decision-making processes. Or being able to connect and relate to the natural and human environment in one's own language; to belong, to share jokes, to argue, to console and seek comfort, to assert and reassure, and to find a sense of community and belonging. The experience of living with – and in – language death can have a strong element of anticipatory grief over a foreseen loss (Bostock 1997: 97) that is sometimes irreversible, and, because of that can feel particularly existential and overwhelming.

The loss of sense of identity, community and relationality that result from language loss means a loss of being able to take for granted a certain habitual way of being with other people. The experience of not being able to take for granted being with other people in a certain way has a name in the philosophy of medicine: it is called “depression” (Ractcliffe 2015). Many of the experiential components of depression can indeed sometimes accompany the experience of language loss: these include things such as loss of hope, feelings of guilt, a diminished sense of agency and self, an altered experience of time, and isolation from other people (Ractcliffe 2015: 2).

Language grief that results from language loss can make this sense of profound loneliness even worse, because the experience of grief is that of a radical break between the world of the grieving person that is falling to pieces, and the “normal” world which continues as usual, as if nothing of significance has happened. The very experience of grief is often accompanied by a sense that this feeling cannot be described in words, either adequately or at all. But how to describe this deep feeling, this profound experience, when the very words that are necessary for the task are precisely what is being lost and what is being grieved?

“To have power”, Karl Deutsch noted, “means not to have to give in, and to force the environment or the other person to do so... the ability to talk instead of listen. In a sense, it is the ability to afford not to learn” (1966: 111). Powerful linguistic communities can be said to be powerful precisely because they have no personal experience of language loss, and therefore can afford not to become aware of the profound pain that accompanies language grief. But being able to afford to not do something does not imply the lack of responsibility, or obligation, to do so. Societies that aspire to be just and good cannot afford to simply overlook or dismiss this particular and yet profound pain experienced by their own members. Recognising the significance of that experience is necessary for taking the idea of linguistic rights seriously, on the basis of an ethical commitment to equal linguistic dignity.

The poems that will be recited today engage each with the often lonely anguish that accompanies language grief, and the many cruelties and violent injustices that have created it, perpetrated by official institutions and social hierarchies. But the poems also highlight the refusal of their authors to be simply relegated to the role of a passive witness to that relentless process, and their determination to reclaim their words and their worlds. Through their words, the authors respond to the destruction of the language with a creative force that is inseparable from the ethical act of poetry itself. Poetry, as Mary Oliver wrote, “is a life-cherishing force. And it requires a vision – a *faith*, to use an old-fashioned term. Yes, indeed. For poems are not, words after all, but fires for the cold, ropes to let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry. Yes, indeed” (Oliver 1994: 122).

It is our hope – and our faith – that the life-cherishing force of poetry has an important role to play in gaining a better understanding of the pain of language grief, and in raising social and political awareness within and across national and linguistic boundaries. Poetry’s deep insight into the human experience, linguistic and otherwise, has much to contribute to contemporary debates on language policy, politics and ethics around the world, and in relation to urgent social, political, economic and environmental challenges. Responding to these challenges should never lose sight of the human experience, as articulated by individuals and communities themselves, and in their own words and/or gestures.

Let me conclude these opening remarks by expressing our gratitude as organisers to all of the contributors, some of which are here with us today, for their generosity in sharing their words, voices and images with us, and for trusting us with what is a profoundly painful feeling that can sometimes seem fundamentally indescribable, especially with an added linguistic barrier in the mix and a request for a translation. We hope that the event will do justice both to their creativity and generosity, and that it is successful in creating a sense of community and mutuality that might provide some sense of relief against the shared backdrop of the pain of language loss and grief. Thank you.

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