

"MY LANGUAGE MADE ME DO IT" — THE SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS REVISITED FOR THE CONTEXT OF AOTEAROA-NEW ZEALAND

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This essay proposes a specific form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, with some suggested implications for Māori-Pākehā relations in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Cet article propose une formulation originale de l'hypothèse Sapir-Whorf aussi appelée théorie du déterminisme linguistique, selon laquelle la structure sémantique d'une langue façonne ou limite la façon dont son locuteur se fait une idée du monde. L'auteur transpose ensuite son analyse sur les conséquences que cela a pu avoir dans les relations Māori-Pākehā en Nouvelle-Zélande.

When reading a Finnish Christmas story recently, I was struck by its rather remarkable title, to my ear as an English speaker: *Ihmeitä tekevä kuusi tuotiin jouluattona*, or 'A miracle-working Christmas tree was brought in on Christmas Eve'. It was actually a mother and daughter who brought in said Christmas tree, but there is no easy way to suggest this in an English title. 'They brought in ...' might be a possibility, but that would prompt the question 'who are you talking about?'; and '... was brought in' suggests some sort of rather forbidding external, perhaps official, agency.

In fact the Finnish passive, as used here, is generally glossed as 'one' did this or that, and seen as cognate with the German and Scandinavian *man* pronoun, which can refer to 'I', 'we', 'you', or 'they' as the context requires.¹

Thus when we as English speakers are confronted with a passive verb to which we cannot readily assign a semantic subject, we are cast into a state of uncertainty,

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1 The most frequent reference of *man* is to a 'we' entity, but this is clearly not possible in this case.

even apprehension – our ignorance of the doer of the action easily morphs into a perception of a remote and threatening 'they' who may have done it.

My late friend Rod Fletcher, who became a skilled Finnish-English translator in his later years – and who was one of the best linguists I have ever known – was profoundly irritated by this ability of Finnish not to say who it was talking about, who was 'doing' the action of the verb. His irritation might perhaps be explained by a Nietzschean insight in *Beyond Good and Evil*:²

The remarkable family likeness within all Indian, Greek and German philosophy is easily enough explained. For where languages are related to each other, it is quite inevitable that because of the shared philosophy of their grammars – because we are unconsciously ruled and guided by our languages' shared grammatical functions – everything is pre-programmed for the similar emergence and succession of philosophical systems, just as the way towards certain other possibilities for interpreting the world around us appears to be obstructed. Philosophers in the Ural-Altaiic linguistic region (where the concept of the 'subject' is the least developed) will very probably look 'into the world' differently from how we do, and find different paths from those of Indo-Europeans or Muslims: the spell cast by certain grammatical functions is ultimately the spell of *physiological* value judgements and ethnic conditions

Thus the stronger insistence on the grammatical subject in English as opposed to Finnish (as a Uralic language) is mirrored in a stronger sense of the philosophical subject, ie 'me' or the 'self', which has some interesting and far-reaching consequences.

Firstly, the need for a clearly defined and explicitly expressed subject excludes the possibility of a vaguely defined subject, as seen in the above example, where the subject of the action of bringing in the Christmas tree is not made clear in Finnish. According to the structures of the Finnish language, the Finnish-speaking reader presumably thinks something like 'oh well, somebody must have brought the tree in, let's wait and see'. But a word for word translation into English generates the implication in the English-speaking reader's mind not of an action performed by the characters in the story, but of some external and possibly forbidding agency, as we have seen.

Secondly, a clearly defined subject also tends to make the object (what I am talking about or interacting with) more clearly separate, different, 'other', from me. It also tends to make the object more concrete – the book title *English in the primary*

2 Friedrich Nietzsche *Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Zur Genealogie der Moral* (Munich, 2009) at 34-35, translation mine.

school, for example, on a New Zealand publication dating from the 1950s, would now probably be expressed as *English in primary schools*. This is because an English-speaking reader of this title now might well ask the question 'what school are you talking about?'

This can be an important insight for a translator working into English. For example, the title of the Hungarian national anthem, *Isten, áldd meg a magyart!*, translates literally as 'God, bless the Hungarian', but to an English-speaking reader today this would suggest a specific, flesh and blood Hungarian, definitely male, and probably wearing a coat and hat. 'God bless our Hungarian nation' might be nearer the mark for a contemporary English translation.

Similarly, the monument in Szczecin, Poland called *Pomnik Czynu Polaków* [word for word translation 'Monument to the Deed of Poles'] is perhaps best called the 'Monument to Polish Heroism' or some such in English, to avoid the suggestion of one particular deed.

What might be the mechanism for this analogy between the grammatical subject and object on the one hand and the philosophical subject and object on the other?

To explore this question, a good place to start is the somewhat distinctive treatment of possessives in English – for just as we English speakers require a clearly specified subject as the doer of an action, we also seem to need an explicitly stated possessive as the owner of a noun. Think of the French command *levez les mains!* This clearly means 'raise *your* hands', but that does not have to be stated in French. This does however have to be made explicit in English, which differs from almost all other European languages in this respect. So when translating *levez les mains* into English, I need to introduce the possessive adjective 'your' to prevent the unwanted 'otherness' that would arise from saying 'raise *the* hands' in English – which could only refer to the hands of a clock, say, or the hands of a corpse during an anatomy demonstration for medical students. So we have the same situation as with our Christmas tree – the English noun is left out in the semantic cold by not being explicitly owned by the person spoken to (or indeed anyone living).

This often becomes a real problem for translators working from various languages into English. In her book *Tercet metafizyczny*,³ for example, the Polish philosopher Barbara Skarga begins with a discussion of *mój świat* (my world), before moving on to *świat społeczny*, or 'collective world'. But whose collective world is this?

3 [A metaphysical trio], Znak, 2009.

Obviously not 'mine' – the owner must be some sort of 'we' entity, and indeed the discussion refers to the world of a village, an organisation, a nation, etc. The question of ownership is left in abeyance for the Polish-speaking reader, but English seems to force me to nail down a specific owner, which is simply not possible here. 'Collective worlds' in the plural will serve for my translation of the chapter title, but the term continues to raise problems throughout the text.

Now, every combination of possessive adjective and noun clearly implies an underlying ownership statement: 'my hands' implies the statement 'I own the hands'. Conversely, the problem with 'the hands' or 'the collective world' is an underlying question 'who owns the hands/world?', to which we as English speakers have no readily available answer. We can extend this idea to any textual utterance, in that I 'own' what I say. For an utterance in general, the underlying statement would be something like 'I say that ...' or 'I tell you that ...'. For the noun elements of a text, the statement might be 'I see a', or 'I tell you about a ...'.

It seems to me that the presence of a more prominent grammatical subject in English becomes reflected in a stronger 'I' as the subject of these underlying narrative sentences. Accordingly, perhaps the differing statuses of the grammatical subject (between, say, Finnish and English) become embedded, or at least are reflected, in the grammar of an implicit narrative phrase standing behind the text. In the case of "the Hungarian", for example, if the implicit narrative phrase (in English) is 'I tell you about the Hungarian' or 'I see the Hungarian', then I as a concrete, individual entity talk about 'the Hungarian', and conjure up in your mind the image of a concrete, individual Hungarian of whom you were not previously aware. But if there is a less concrete 'I' in the implicit narrative phrase in another language, the stance might rather be 'One is (= we are) talking about the Hungarian', then reference can be to something we already know about, and the general concept of 'all Hungarians' becomes more readily available. The idea is therefore that the grammatical subject of the uttered sentence transits to the grammatical subject of an implied narrative phrase, which comes to denote the philosophical subject interacting with the philosophical object, the thinker interacting with that which is thought, the 'I' reacting to, and saying something about, the world.

So it is that in English, the 'I' as observer and speaker stands as a more clearly defined entity, and as a more autonomous one. In Finnish and Scandinavian languages, a specific 'I' is instead able to progressively emerge from the *man* entity, which, as we have seen, is a semantic chameleon, able to take on the colours of 'I', 'we', 'you' or 'they' as required by the situation.

The consequences flowing from this for the translator working into English from other European languages are many and varied. For example, modal verbs with the

dictionary meaning of 'must', such as French *doit*, are often best translated into English as 'should'. According to the argument advanced here, this would be because as an English speaker, 'I' own the utterance as 'me, myself, I', and therefore by translating *doit* as 'must' I am arrogating myself authority to lay down what is and is not to be done. Thus in English the implied introductory narrative utterance might be 'I (and no-one else) say that ...'. My suggestion is that the equivalent narrative utterance in other European languages is more along the lines of 'I, as a member of the group of all right-thinking individuals, say that', or some such.

Similarly, opinions are more clearly implied as '*my* opinions' in English texts than elsewhere. When translating an article in a German newspaper about a company that had failed, with the possibility of some malpractice having been involved, I was confronted with the by-line *Sie sind ehrlich*. This had been literally translated by our contractor – who knows German much better than I do – as "They are honest". Now, that would clearly identify this as the opinion of the journalist, the 'I' entity behind the statement. The content revealed that it was *the directors* who claimed to be honest men. Thus the introductory utterance was not '*I* say that ...' but rather '*man* says that...', with *man* then being construed as the subject of the story, generating the implication '*they* say that ...'. Because of this difference between the implied narrative sentences in German and English respectively, a different translation was required.

And when spread over the time axis, the more distinct discourse entities generated by our more clearly defined subject also tend to have the effect of making every utterance different from the one before it, preventing the repeated use of formulas and promoting the novelty of utterances. Examples include the Japanese greeting *tadaima* invariably uttered by the man of the house on arriving home from work, and the formulaic New Year's and Easter greetings usual in Russian and many other languages. In other words, utterances implicitly spoken by a 'we' entity can readily be repeated, whereas utterances spoken by an 'I' require constant variation to retain validity and sincerity. For example, a Kiwi friend living in Japan told me he felt compelled to say something new and different on returning home each day (but was roundly corrected for his pains). And when I as an English speaker sit down to tap out some New Year's texts, because 'I' am doing the action, I feel the urge to write everyone a different message. If I were a Russian speaker, however, 'I' would perhaps be writing my texts or making my phone calls on the basis that 'this is what we always do', and the perceived need for novelty would disappear.

The differences mentioned so far are on the level of language and translation. But just as Nietzsche sees the status of the grammatical subject as reflected in that of the

philosophical subject, I see some wider-ranging implications for the world view of speakers of different languages. I am therefore proposing a version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which states that the way in which we conceptualise the world depends on the particular language we speak. Thus different cultures are said to have different concepts of time, based on the differing structures of their languages, or speakers of a language in which the word 'bridge' is masculine supposedly associate different attributes with bridges to those vested in bridges by speakers of a language where this word is feminine.

But I am applying the Sapir-Whorf rather differently from this. It is not what we see in the world, or how we see it, that is influenced or even dictated by the syntax or semantics of our language. Rather, it is our place in the world, where and how we sit in it, that is defined by the structures of the language we speak.

So I am arguing that our perception of how we as members of a particular culture relate to the world around us is based on the relative strength and distinctness of the subject or possessor entity in the language we speak, which is commensurately reflected in the distinctness and concreteness of the object and the possessed. I suggest that the nature of the grammatical subject entity comes to inform the grammar of an implicit narrative phrase that underpins everything we say, so that the grammatical subject-object distinction comes to be reflected in the philosophical subject-object division.

I believe this is rather more interesting than the usual statement of the theory as outlined above, and quite different from those claims. For example, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was originally mainly used to differentiate 'standard average European' (SAE) from indigenous languages, in particular Hopi. But I have been constrained to arrive at these conclusions from decades of translating *within* the SAE domain, working into English from other European languages.

This is interesting in itself, since according to no less an authority than David Crystal, in his definition of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*:⁴

(t)he differences in world-view imposed by different languages have, however, proved extremely difficult to elucidate or test experimentally, and the fact of the possibility of bilingual translation weakens the force of the theory's claims.

In reply, I have to tell him that it is precisely some specific difficulties of bilingual translation that have led me to formulate these ideas.

4 David Crystal *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2003) at 405.

As an English speaker, therefore, I will tend to see the world largely as separate from me, as something I can observe and manipulate – even though I am clearly part of the world around me, so this clear distinction must be a simplification or an exaggeration.

So could it be that speakers of other European languages are inclined to have a clearer sense of belonging to the world as well as observing it from the outside? Well, perhaps so, since after presenting some of these ideas at a recent NZSTI conference I was informed by a staff member at Auckland University that her academic colleagues from Continental European countries appear to find it easier to place their research in the context of *mātauranga Māori* than their New Zealand counterparts do. Thus the rigid distinction between subject and object in English could conceivably make it more difficult for English-speaking scientists to embrace less empirical paradigms such as constructivism.

It could also be that this implied narrative stance is underpinning the current wave of 'cancel culture'. Perhaps the clear distinction between subject and object, between me and the world around me, is conducive to blaming and finger-pointing, with no sense of 'there but for the grace of God' or 'we are all poor miserable sinners'.

There are also striking differences between philosophy written in English as opposed to philosophy in other European languages, with a more pragmatic approach in the former, and a more speculative one in the latter.

The discussion so far has focused on differences between English and other European languages. But the situation becomes even more interesting, and relevant in this country, when Māori is brought into consideration.

Once again, the best place to start is perhaps with possessive structures. We have already noted the insistence in English on identifying an explicit owner, as compared with the more fluid patterns of reference in other European languages. But the differences between English and Māori in this area are even more striking. In English, 'I' tend to appropriate and own things – 'my' this, 'my' that. But in Māori there are things that 'I' own (*tāku* possession) and things that I am owned by (*tōku* possession). In the English linguistic context this would tend to generate a 'me against the world' stance, as compared with a 'me in the thick of things, me as part of the world around me' stance in *te ao Māori*.

This sense of belonging clearly extends to other people in the world, since in Māori I own my child (*tāku* possession), but am owned by my parent (*tōku* possession). 'We' are therefore all in this together, which is pretty much the domain of the Māori first person plural pronoun *tātou*. Hence the implicit narrative utterance

in Māori could well be 'I (on behalf of/as a member of *tātou*) say/believe that ...'. Some of the potential implications for intercultural relations here in New Zealand will be addressed later in this essay.

Now that we have brought Māori into the comparative picture, it becomes possible to formulate some further potential world view differences. For example, there might be an impact on religious or other beliefs. A religious creed, say, is a statement of faith typically in the form 'I believe that ...'. But underlying that statement, the function of a creed is ultimately to express and clearly state what a given 'we' entity believes. As the 'we' entity enshrined in English weakens and shrinks, could we become less likely to hold religious or other beliefs? 'No we, no creed', so to speak? It is certainly the case that we as Pākehā readily accept and rely on *karakia* and Māori blessings on solemn and tragic occasions, in the absence of any rituals of our own that would attract sufficient cohesion.

The 'no we, no creed' idea above might appear to be dramatically contradicted by the emergence of belief in Q-Anon myths, extreme right-wing agendas and the like, with English-speakers taking a prominent role. So what is happening here? I would suggest that the 'we' entity that formerly stood behind Christian faith, the myth of patriotism or Empire, etc, has decayed, fragmented, atomised or faded away – depending on your metaphor of preference. But perhaps as a species we cannot live without myth, and indeed, since the Enlightenment the negation of myth has in fact become a founding myth in its own right. So in the West, 'we' are saying that we do not believe in myth any more.

But 'myth will out', so to speak – our human nature continues to assert itself, and so it is that more obviously trumped-up mythical beliefs keep springing up, now owned not by any kind of society-wide consensual 'we', but by a narrower 'I and folk who think like me' entity. This is no longer *tātou*, which as the inclusive form of 'we' in Māori specifically means 'we, including you'. These new myths of confrontation are the province of *mātou*, the *exclusive* pronoun denoting 'we, but not you', which necessarily builds confrontation rather than consensus. Elsewhere around the world, authoritarian governments are attempting to revive the old myths based on patriotism and/or religious belief, but this can be seen as a phoney *tātou* in the absence of a genuine social consensus.

Similarly, we have Pākehā pop songs, but very few folk songs. And proverbs, as statements that 'we' all know and resonate to, are now extremely rarely used in English oratory and writing. Contrast this with the situation in Māori, as reflected in the recent appearance of Hona Black's *He Iti te Kupu – Māori Metaphors and*

Similes.⁵ And indeed, I am reliably informed that familiar proverbs continue to play an essential role in Māori oratory.

All this adds up to a synchronic picture of where English is 'at' right now, as compared with other languages, ie a language with the default stance of a specific, individual, strongly expressed subject confronting a specific, concrete and individual object, as compared with the situation in, say, Finnish and numerous other European languages, and indeed Māori.

But what of the diachronic perspective? How did we get here?

We know that the level of subject dominance and the degree of insistence on a specific, concrete subject change over time in a given language. Compare German *ich denke* and English 'I think' with the older expressions *mich dünkt* (ie 'it thinks to me' or some such) and 'methinks'. Similarly, English 'one' was more acceptable in the past, and is less so now; 'the primary school' worked fine as a generalising expression for primary schools across the nation two or three generations ago, but may not do so now; and what of the current flurry about gendered pronouns? We tend to see this as driven by our increased awareness of gender discrimination issues, but that in turn could be underpinned by the increasingly concrete reference of nouns and pronouns in English. A pronoun used to refer to a noun, but increasingly now refers to the flesh and blood reality denoted by said noun, I would suggest.

Across a much longer timespan, we also know that the subject entity does not appear to have been paramount or even mandatory in Proto-Indo-European,⁶ so a tendency towards a strong and mandatory subject in Indo-European languages has clearly emerged in the course of time.

Now, why would that be?

The explanation might be along the following lines. Human language can be seen as a constant process of analysing, selecting, distinguishing and individuating on the one hand, and resynthesising, merging and recombining on the other. But in every act of articulating our thoughts, the paramount process involved is one of individuating and differentiating. In the words of Wilhelm von Humboldt,⁷ "When the human species sought linguistic signs, our intellect was engaged in making

5 Oratia Media Ltd, 2021.

6 Lehmann, Winfried *Proto-Indo-European Syntax* (University of Texas Press, Austin and London, 1974) at 40.

7 Wilhelm von Humboldt *Schriften zur Sprache* (Reklam, Stuttgart, 1995) at 4.

distinctions" [*Als der Mensch Sprachzeichen suchte, hatte sein Verstand das Geschäft zu unterscheiden*].⁸ This refers to the beginnings of language in general, but I believe we go through the same process every time we open our mouths to say something. First, and probably foremost, from the inexhaustibly rich reserves of the potential language within us we have to individuate, select and differentiate; I, as opposed to you, have something to say that is intended for you rather than some other audience, about subject matter specifically differentiated from anything else I might have chosen to talk about.

So since, as seen above, a more individual subject is also a more strongly expressed subject, perhaps the aggregated impact of all these individuating decisions on the micro level inexorably generates a stronger subject entity, and a more specific reference to concrete subject matter, on the macro level of a language's development over time. This would apply to all languages.

According to what is known as the 'analcycity spiral', the typical pattern of linguistic evolution is from isolating language (such as Chinese and, to a large extent, modern English) to agglutinating language (eg Finnish and Hungarian) to synthetic language (eg Greek, Latin, most modern European tongues). The circle then begins again, back to isolating, followed by agglutinating, and so on. The suggestion here is that this apparently unidirectional path might be inherently driven by the very nature of the act of communicating; the process therefore takes place in all languages, but at a slower or faster pace, depending on the external or contingent factors operating in each case.

The characteristic feature of English is its extremely rapid evolution from the highly inflected structure of Old English to the isolating linguistic structure we see today, and so it is that English has the strongest subject focus of any language it has been my good fortune to deal with.

So far, then, we have seen how synchronic differences between the structures of various languages may impact on the world view of their speakers, and briefly explored the process of how these differences may have arisen over time.

Now it may be interesting to consider some of the conceivable implications for race relations in this country, and indeed the vexed, and very present, debate on 'white privilege' and 'institutional racism'.

I have argued in this essay that where English appears increasingly focused on the entity of 'I', other European languages retain a strong entity corresponding to English 'one', referring to 'I', 'you', 'we' or 'they' as the context demands, and from

8 Author's translation.

which these entities can be seen to emerge. In Māori, on the other hand, the possessive structures outlined above provide a clear sense of 'me-in-the-world', and therefore of 'we, all of us here together', or the entity of *tātou*.

These contrasts could well reflect the faster or slower speed of an inexorable drift towards a more individual subject entity, as described above, as an integral feature of linguistic change, which in turn might reflect a faster or slower evolution towards the individual as the locus of human rights and responsibilities.

Now, what if this individual locus as enshrined in such documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the American Constitution was not entirely ... universal? What if in some cases the locus of rights, responsibilities and wellbeing indicators was not the individual or family unit, but entire groups of the population? What if ... why, that is pretty much the situation with the Treaty partnership relationship here in New Zealand.

It is certainly possible to assert that every *individual* in New Zealand has equal rights and entitlements. But it is equally clear that outcomes are dramatically unequal between, say, Pākehā and Māori as *population groups* within our society. Perhaps arguing on the basis of individuals is an approach suggested to, or foisted upon, us by the 'I' focus of English as the language we speak. In contrast, the *tātou* focus of Māori (and its equivalent in other indigenous languages) might tend to prompt a group-based appreciation of success and wellbeing.

So rather than decrying the approach of creating different institutions for different population groups as 'separatism' or 'apartheid', it might be possible to see it as simply reflecting a different world view, a different way of dividing the world up, on the basis of the respective languages we speak.

And what is perceived as racial bias or prejudice might be reanalysed as a linguistic and cultural bias. A couple of anecdotes from my own experience as a translator may help to illustrate this.

To begin on what seems to be to be the purely linguistic level, I was once told (in English) by an Italian waiter down on his luck that "there are two problems in my life – the woman and the horse". Now, rather than just smiling and moving on, it is worth reflecting for a moment on what is happening here. Given that we were speaking English, I for a moment interpreted the narrative as 'I (the waiter) am telling you (John Jamieson) about a (specific) woman (that I, the waiter know about, and you do not)', and similarly for 'the horse'. So in English, we have an individual 'I', an individual 'you', and an individual woman and horse respectively. But the underlying, presumably Italian, narrative was more like 'we both know what women

are like and how horses let you down at the TAB' – with a sense of collusion and collaboration between 'I' and 'you', and nouns not specific, but general, conveying not the identification of singular entities but the manifestation of attributes common to entities known to both parties in the conversation. Many of the individualising barriers present in English would appear not to be present in Italian.

The next example shows how the linguistic then becomes the cultural. I was interpreting for a meeting between four businessmen – two Frenchmen on one side, and a New Zealander and an Englishman on the other. The discussion was about a joint venture they were engaged in. The whole process almost broke down when the French side submitted a business plan for the next ten years. The New Zealand side saw this as so ridiculous that they thought they were being taken for fools, whereas my French clients were puzzled at the suddenly cool reaction from their interlocutors. I had to resort to national clichés and stereotypes, and tell the French that the English were a pragmatic lot, and lacked the imagination needed to look ten years ahead in an uncertain world; and to tell my New Zealand clients that the French, being French, had a theoretical and speculative mindset, and were discussing these figures without asserting they were necessarily accurate or true. Once again, the potential conflict may be understood in the light of differing underlying narratives. The strong 'I' standing behind an English utterance suggests a truth of fact rather than conviction or hypothesis; but in French the narrative, along the lines of 'one (we) might well envisage', is rather more flexible. My point here is that the difference between narratives generated distrust between the parties, and had the effect of mobilising national stereotypes. The only ingredient lacking for these to be construed as racial stereotypes was the absence of any clear ethnic differences between the parties.

But if the institutions of a country were largely based on one dominant linguistic and cultural narrative, and many of the users of those institutions were operating with a different narrative, and if there was also an ethnic difference between the parties, then misunderstandings of the kind described above could easily be (mis)construed as 'institutional racism'. It could be that this is the situation we have in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

The argument can also be formulated in terms of mythology. My study of alternative translations into Māori of Luke's gospel prompts the clear conclusion that on the arrival of Europeans in Aotearoa they would have been perceived by Māori as a people who had a founding myth of religious belief different from that underpinning the Māori world view. So this would have been a situation of one people with a deeply held mythical world view recognising another people with a different world view, but held in a similar manner.

Since that time, however, English has rapidly drifted towards a more subject-dominant structure, which has been reflected in a stronger sense of subject-object separation in the philosophical sense, and a more empirical, logic-based view of the world. Accordingly the situation between Māori and Pākehā now may be rather an encounter between a people that does have an acknowledged consensual founding myth (Māori) with one that does not (Pākehā). The faster evolution of English towards individual subject dominance (in both the grammatical and philosophical sense) is reflected in the construction of institutions built on a logical and evidence-based foundation – *logos*, according to the terminology used by Gary Zukav in his discussion of the new physics.⁹ This contrasts with the continuing presence of myth implicit in the *tātou* world view (*mythos* according to Zukav's classification), a mismatch that generates a perception of Anglo-based institutions as alienating, and potentially creates an experience of 'institutional racism' (whereas it should perhaps rather be construed as a language-based cultural dominance).

So the world view implied and perhaps dictated by English structures has dispelled any society-wide sense of a founding or consensus-forming myth, ushering in the period of postmodern individualism. But myth is still alive and well in Māori culture (as reflected in, or indeed prompted by, the linguistic structures of Māori). And it is this fundamental cultural gap plus Pākehā linguistic and cultural dominance that often adds up to a perception of 'institutional racism', I would suggest. But perhaps the issue is not one of race, but of culture as defined by language.

This might be seen as a rather depressing state of affairs. If the problem is encoded in the DNA of our respective languages, merely highlighting the issue in school curricula, say, may at best generate awareness, possibly accompanied by shame and resentment, while at the same time possibly further accentuating the problem on the subconscious level. The message may fall victim to the medium, so to speak.

So what to do? Well, if language is causing our problem by affecting the way we think, we might first address the question of how we talk, then that of how we think.

Thus, if English as our language tends to separate us from the world, we could decide to focus on the cohesive elements of language. Thus if an 'I versus *tātou*' gap is preventing effective communication across the cultural divide, why not use *tātou* based messages in official and institutional communications?

9 Gary Zukav *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (Rider/Hutchinson of London, London, 1979) at 276-277.

As a thought experiment inserted in a conference paper given many years ago, I imagined how the message 'The government would like New Zealanders to eat more apples' might be effectively translated into Māori. I speculated that *Me kai āporo tātou* might be the way to go (literally 'let's get apple-eating'), on the basis that a brochure written in Māori is inherently intended to become part of the reader's world. No New Zealand Māori translators were present, but a wonderful Cook Islands Māori translator in the audience told me that she had been "wanting to use *tātou* for years, but didn't think she was allowed to"!

It is worth noting that *tātou* narratives such as "Let's do this" and "That's not who we are", and "the (our) team of five million" have recently been used to exceedingly good effect in English in New Zealand. I believe the same technique could be employed much more widely, not just for political and crisis management purposes, but simply to communicate effectively in a bicultural society. This might enable an organisation such as Oranga Tamariki to be perceived more positively by some of its stakeholders.

I believe that communication techniques such as 'assertive language' and perhaps even 'plain English' may build capability for more effective communication in English, but in doing so could alienate those who see the world through different linguistic spectacles. My fear is that in spite of the current practice of liberally besprinkling public discourse in New Zealand with Māori words, the insight and goodwill this is designed to generate may be negated by our implied narrative sentence as New Zealand speakers of English, which is drifting ever further from the more inclusive narrative that lies behind Māori, and presumably indigenous languages in general.

And on the question of how we think, while the old collectively held cohesive narratives, myths of patriotism, religious faith, etc may no longer be available, we still have the collective entity of English as the language we all share, which largely encompasses the collective 'we' of New Zealand society. So again, rather than allowing language to divide us and separate us from our world, we could counterattack with a different kind of language to enable us to re-join that world. A good starting point might be in the classroom; given that the decidedly individual focus of English comes most clearly to the fore in informational or purposeful communication, which by its nature includes material new and unfamiliar to the listener, perhaps it would be beneficial for us to immerse ourselves in non-communicational language that is, or becomes, familiar to us, so that we can inhabit our language again, and allow it to inhabit us. Thus we, and more particularly school pupils, could set ourselves to learning by heart long tracts of poetry, song lyrics, and nonsense verse, drawing on the pre-logical, spontaneous, creative sources of language that precede or subvert the strictures of logic and differentiation.

Rather than actively trying to manipulate language to achieve this or that aim, rather than exposing our minds to spin, advertising and controlled communication designed to evoke this or that reaction, we might luxuriate in language as a musical and emotional experience, and as a shared experience in the classroom context.

This probably already takes place in the playground, within groups of pupils who identify with each other at the *mātou* level. I am suggesting bringing it into the classroom for *tātou*, as an experience to be shared by us all. I believe some educational research conducted along these lines might be of real interest.

Other forms of this remedy, again in the school context, might include mass singing, as in days of yore, and in fact rote learning per se could even have the effect of building a sense of cohesion and togetherness. Perhaps the key benefit from collectively repeating our times table learned by rote is not to teach us to multiply, but to provide a shared cultural, uncritical learning experience akin to the passing on of ancestral knowledge in an oral and indigenous culture – a form of *whakapapa* for members of Ngāti Pākehā, if you will.

While all this would be very difficult to prove in any rigorous fashion, this argument at least has the merit of suggesting some forces that might be constraining us, as Pākehā New Zealanders, to act in certain ways, as if we are caught up in a current that is carrying us in a particular direction. It frees us to some extent from the accusation of racism, and tells us, as bearers of the English language and the cultural stance that comes with it, that in terms of humanity as a whole, we are caught in a very distinctive and unusual narrative. The benefits of diversity might now be considered from that perspective – rather than standing at the centre of our world and appreciating all the strange and remarkable features of others we see around us, we might define ourselves as the outlier, the odd ones out. Such an awareness that we may not be the measure of all things, and not entirely in control of the situation, would be beneficial and refreshing, in my view, and given awareness of the position – who knows, it may even be possible to do something about it.