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# Tongue-Tied: Rawls, Political Philosophy and Metalinguistic Awareness

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**Abstract:** Is our moral cognition “coloured” by the language(s) that we speak? Despite the centrality of language to political life and agency, limited attempts were made thus far in contemporary political philosophy to consider this possibility. We therefore set out to explore the possible influence of linguistic relativity effects on political thinking in linguistically-diverse societies. We begin by introducing the facts and fallacies of the “linguistic relativity” principle, and explore the various ways in which they “colour,” often covertly, current normative debates. To illustrate this, we focus on two key Rawlsian concepts: the original position and public reason. We then move to consider the resulting epistemic challenges and opportunities facing contemporary multilingual democratic societies in an age of increased mobility, arguing for the consequent imperative of developing political metalinguistic awareness and political extelligence among political scientists, philosophers and actors alike in an irreducibly complex linguistic world.

**Keywords:** Political liberalism; linguistic relativity; semantic universals; political metalinguistic awareness; political extelligence

## 1. Introduction: Pigments of (Political) Reality

Is our moral cognition “coloured” by the language(s) that we speak? Despite the obvious significance of language to the human experience and perception of the world, as well as more narrowly to political thinking, limited attempts have been made thus far in normative political philosophy to consider the possibility of language-based epistemic diversity effects on moral cognition. Such an omission is particularly intriguing, considering the centrality of language to

key notions such as deliberative democracy and public reason. Even within the recent literature on linguistic justice (most notably Kymlicka and Patten 2003; Van Parijs 2011), for example, language is primarily approached as an *object* of normative political theorising, similarly to race, culture or religion, rather than as its *medium*.

We therefore set out in this paper to outline and explore some of the issues that emerge from the possibility of linguistic relativity effects on political language, and their implications for normative political philosophy. We begin by introducing some of the facts and fallacies of the linguistic relativity principle, and the various ways in which experimentally documented and potential linguistic relativity effects have considerable implications for a number of key issues in contemporary political philosophy. To illustrate our argument, we focus on John Rawls's work (Rawls 1999; 2005a; 2005b), owing to its wide influence on the discipline. Specifically, we argue that Rawls's sidestepping of linguistic epistemology results in a theory that is, unwittingly, epistemically "biased," and that the incorporation of linguistic epistemology successfully addresses and contributes in reducing this shortcoming. We conclude with a broader reflection on the implications of linguistic relativity for existing and emerging topics in political philosophy – the challenges it presents and the various benefits it is expected to generate in its service.

## **2. Political Language and the Linguistic Relativity Principle**

Does language affect our perception of the world? The notion of a "linguistic relativity hypothesis" that underpins this longstanding question is often associated with the work of American linguistic anthropologists Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941) and is sometimes also labelled "Whorfianism" or the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis." In truth, however, the principle of linguistic relativity has never been formally codified as such

(certainly not by Whorf or Sapir). Instead, it is better understood as an ongoing inquiry on how language influences thought, shared by scholars from different disciplines, historical contexts and approaches.<sup>1</sup>

The principle of linguistic relativity is commonly interpreted in one of two ways: a *strong* interpretation or a *weak* interpretation. “[U]nder the strong claim [the strong interpretation], linguistically uncoded concepts would be unattainable; under the weak form [the weak interpretation], concepts which happen to be linguistically coded would be facilitated or favoured (e.g. would be more accessible, easier to remember, or the default coding for non-linguistic cognition)” (Gumperz and Levinson 1996, 23). In other words, the strong interpretation perceives thought as constrained, if not imprisoned, in language, whereas the weak interpretation acknowledges that language may affect, but not (pre)determine, or otherwise irreversibly “program,” our cognitive trajectories and habits. Intriguingly, while most of the research on linguistic relativity is focused on the weak interpretation, much of its critique has been historically directed at the strong interpretation, which is also, ironically, the one that is most commonly taught and discussed outside specialized circles (e.g. Gumperz and Levinson 1996, 12).

When examining the plausibility of the linguistic relativity hypothesis, and its potential effects on political cognition and discourse, and consequently political life, it is useful to keep in mind the history of science that underpins current understandings of language. The question of the

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. see Von Humboldt (1988); Herder (2002); Boas (1966) [1911]; Sapir [1949] (1985); Whorf (1956); Gumperz and Levinson (1996); Lakoff (1987); Lucy (1992); Wierzbicka (2014).

nature and essence of language is one that has been dividing linguists (and consequently philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, etc.) since the late 1960s. While earlier approaches rooted in structural linguistics emphasized the contextualized and social nature of language, competing approaches grounded in the evolving field of cognitive science approached language, by contrast, in a more formal way, as an abstracted set of defined operators. This fundamental theoretical, conceptual and methodological divide between the two approaches, further compounded by the computational turn in cognitive science, effectively resulted in a split science of language, one that is more at home in context-sensitive fields such as history and anthropology, and another that is closer to formal approaches in disciplines such as cognitive science and computer science (e.g. Graff 2015; Levinson 2012). Of the two approaches to language, the latter is often granted more scientific credibility in the social sciences, particularly by those social scientists who are more oriented towards quantitative methods. However, the presumed context-independent account of language endorsed by the latter approach seems at odds with the context-sensitivity of political analysis, whether normative or empirical, particularly when advanced by researchers formerly associated with the formal approach, such as George Lakoff (Lakoff 1987; 1996; 2003; 2008).

The weak interpretation of the linguistic relativity principle holds some important insights for political philosophy, as it moves away from a highly abstracted conception of language into a more empirically-grounded understanding of the interrelations between moral perception and linguistic diversity. Importantly, unlike the strong version, the weak version avoids identifying a deterministic causal chain between language and culture, or arguing that the latter is wholly conditioned by the former. Instead, it conceives language and culture as interdependent, maintaining that we are normally “nudged” (Collin 2012, 283) to see and think about the world in certain ways by the lexicon and grammar of our language(s). The possibility of linguistic

relativity effects on political language therefore calls into question the presupposition that all citizens necessarily share the same set of epistemic resources when reflecting on political ethics, particularly in multilingual political communities.

Likewise, when considering the interplay of linguistic diversity, individual linguistic repertoires and thought, it is useful to keep in mind that, until very recently, bilingualism was perceived as an anomaly, which explains “the monolingual (mis)reading of Humboldt, Sapir and Whorf in American Academia” (Pavlenko 2014, 18). It is only relatively recently that bilingualism research has consolidated into a distinct area of systematic investigation on language and cognition, in what has been labeled the “bilingual turn” (Pavlenko 2014, 18-25). One of the main conclusions of this new area of investigation has been “the growing realization that ‘monolingual’ theories are of limited use in explaining linguistic and cognitive processing in bi- and multilinguals [and that] the bi- and multilingual mind requires its own theory” (Pavlenko 2014, 20). Such a conclusion is rooted in a “neo-Whorfian” framework (e.g. Lakoff 1987; Wierzbicka 1997; 2006; 2014; Cook and Bassetti 2011; Jarvis 2011; Jarvis and Pavlenko 2008). The purpose of this article, accordingly, is not simply to argue that monolingual speakers of Italian and Hebrew, for example, are nudged by their languages in particular directions through their political and moral vocabularies. Rather, we argue that the moral reflection of citizens whose linguistic repertoire is larger than one may therefore be understood as different from a monolingual moral reflection, to the extent that moral reflection engages the enhanced “metalinguistic awareness” of the reflecting individual, i.e. their “the ability to reflect upon and manipulate the structural features of language itself as an object of thought, as opposed to simply using the language system to comprehend and produce utterances” (Zhou 2000, 346).

Before we begin our analysis, it is useful to keep in mind that the deliberate choice to focus on a multilingual exploration of political concepts is not problem-free. For one thing, the construction of meaning in language, political and otherwise, is carried out not in lexical isolation but in broader textual segments (e.g. clauses, sentences, paragraphs). Similarly, concepts acquire their meaning not in isolation but rather in relation to other concepts. Cross-linguistic conceptual equivalency, therefore, depends not merely on the formal existence of a broadly similar notion in a different language (even if purposefully and carefully coined), but also on the extent to which it is nested in relatively similar “terminological networks” (Cassin 2014b, xvii; see also Freeden and Vincent 2013, 12-13). For another, the focus on distinct concepts relies heavily on the notion of “word” as historically defined by Greco-Roman grammarians and later adopted by their modern Western successors. “Word,” however, is far from being a universal category in linguistics (Baratin et al. 2014, 1244), and “was developed for the familiar languages of Europe... Indeed... some of the criteria for ‘word’ are only fully applicable for languages of this type” (Dixon and Aikhenvald 2003, 3). The notion of “word” is therefore skewed in the direction of powerful European languages, but much harder to identify in (poli)synthetic languages, which often require an entire sentence in order to translate their “words” into isolating/analytical languages (e.g. English).<sup>2</sup> Despite these limitations, however, our focus on single words as our basic unit of analysis creates a useful starting point for discussing cross-linguistic political vocabularies with intellectual branches in political research that focus on conceptual analysis, such as analytical political philosophy, conceptual history and comparative political thought.

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<sup>2</sup>Consider, for example, the Siouan Crow word *akdiammalapáashkuuassaaleewaachiinmook*, translated into English as “we’ll look for someone who [will] take you to Billings” (Rankin et al. 2003, 183).

Furthermore, while this article engages with political vocabulary and political terminology, it is important to keep in mind that “there is no existing theory of political terminology” (Chilton 2008, 226), and likewise “no established approaches, or school of thoughts... no classic texts, no repertoire of basic concepts or methods of data gathering and analysis [theorizing its dissemination and implementation]... neither within research on political language nor within political science or sociology” (Oberhuber 2008, 271). Together with the largely marginal position of linguistic epistemology in contemporary political philosophy, this fragmented theoretical, conceptual and methodological framework makes it even more challenging to understand the role and function of linguistic epistemology in the political life of multilingual societies. As a matter of scientific imperative, our analysis draws on a broad range of disciplinary sources in political science, philosophy, linguistics, sociology, cognitive science and anthropology, but it by no means attempts to present an exhaustive, let alone a unified, intellectual terrain. Rather, in this article we draw on our own particular disciplinary expertise in order to examine the topic in a principled and systematic manner that we believe to be currently missing in contemporary political philosophy.

### **3. Linguistic Relativity and John Rawls’s Political Philosophy**

Opting to begin a discussion of linguistic relativity by focusing on Rawls’s political philosophy is hardly a self-explanatory choice. For one thing, language - understood in its concrete form as a natural language rather than a specialized philosophical speech or a Platonic ideal - hardly plays a significant role in Rawls’s work. The consideration of possible linguistic relativity effects on Rawls’s theory, however, is capable of generating some importantly useful insights. This section therefore turns its attention to two key concepts within the Rawlsian conceptual map that are viewed as central to Rawls’s approach to justice in particular and political life more broadly: (1) the *original position* and (2) *public reason*. Reinterpreting these two concepts



along more epistemically conscious lines by considering the effects of linguistic relativity, we argue, generates a conception of political ethics (and of a theory of justice) that is more nuanced and grounded in existing political life, rather than in an abstracted moral cognition, and therefore more capable of identifying - and redressing - consequent instances of epistemic and moral bias.

- **3.1. The Original Position**

Rawls's "original position" attempts to neutralize the effect of particularistic biases in the process of determining which principles of justice ought to guide society, by stripping individuals of particularistic traits, such as gender, age, race or talent. To that end, the individual parties to that hypothetical agreement behind the veil of ignorance possess only the knowledge of "the general facts about human society...[and]...are presumed to know whatever general facts affect the choice of the principles of justice" (Rawls 1999a, 119). This carefully-crafted thought experiment raises immediate difficulties when we consider the question of language. Specifically, if the original position is a decision-making (or agreement-reaching) process, which linguistic mechanisms facilitate it? Language may potentially be neutralized, along with race or ethnicity, to the extent that it is perceived as a divisive identitarian feature. But, without *any* language at their disposal, how are the parties to reach any kind of meaningful engagement at all? The conceptual infrastructure of human cooperation, particularly the type upon which the Rawlsian notion of cooperative justice is premised, requires a fairly complex and nuanced level of *semantic* interaction, one that could accommodate a meaningful discussion of concepts such as "freedom," "democracy" and "fairness." Such concepts, however, are not a standalone ethical vocabulary. Rather, they are rooted in the particularistic tradition of Anglo-American political philosophy. (Mis)perceiving Anglo-American political semantics as "the human norm" (Wierzbicka 1997, 32), by perceiving English to represent a

“universal logic, identical in all times and all places” (Cassin 2014b, xviii), ironically nurtures a particularistic bias rather than successfully avoiding it.

Anna Wierzbicka, (Wierzbicka 2006, chs. 4-5) for example, shows how terms such as “fair” and “reasonable,” which are central to Rawls’s political philosophy, present an undeniably “Anglo” cultural bias. The meaning of the English word “reasonable,” for example, involves “limiting one’s claims on others and at the same time appealing to reasons” (Wierzbicka 2006, 135), attitudes which, Wierzbicka points out, emerged from specific aspects of British history such as the British Enlightenment. The standard French translation “*raisonnable*,” however, does not contain any allusions to moderation and to other people (Wierzbicka 2006, 139). Similarly, “fairness,” with its ideas of “social cooperation” and of “a public and agreed-upon standard” (Rawls 2001, 6), can be traced back to John Locke’s political philosophy and, more generally, “to the post-Enlightenment move away from metaphysics and to the shift from an ethics based on religion to a ‘procedural morality’ and to an ethics based on ‘reason’, ‘social cooperation’, and ‘each participant’s rational advantage’” (Wierzbicka 2006, 154).<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, Wierzbicka claims, there exist no exact translations of “fairness” in French and German (and, arguably, in many others of the world’s roughly 6,000 languages). Even when approximate translations are available, speakers of different languages are nevertheless “nudged” to focus on different connotations owing to different semantic overtones.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Ives (2014) on the influence of Lockean thought on contemporary language perceptions and beliefs as a neutral vehicle for transmitting ideas between idealized monolingual native speakers, and their consequent difficulties when theorising the politics of language.

Wierzbicka's critique, which also includes an analysis of Rawls's contextualised political semantics (Wierzbicka 2006, 143-4, 152-5), introduces an epistemic dimension into the original position by identifying linguistic relativity effects among the deliberating parties behind the veil of ignorance. English, after all, is not the only language in which moral and political debates take place. Concepts such as Japanese *wa* (和, "harmony," "peaceful group conformity") (Wierzbicka 1997, 253, 279) or Bantu *ubuntu* ("humane-ness," "sharing a universal bond of humanity") (e.g. Louw 2006, 161-73) seem just as pertinent for discussing the just state of society.

This does not imply, however, that the Rawlsian original position is *irremediably* biased due to Rawls's use of Anglo-American political semantics. After all, the parties in the original position are essentially motivated by prudential reasons. Their goal, that is, is to maximize the good of the citizens they represent, who have "higher-order interests" (Rawls 1999a, xiii) in cultivating and employing their moral powers, and who require certain primary goods. Since the notion of the "good" is not particularistic to the moral vocabulary of English (Wierzbicka 2014, 34-5) there exists a scope, within the original position, for neutralizing the potential negative effects of linguistic relativity. Crucially, however, in their deliberations the parties should seek to refrain from using terms that belong exclusively to Anglo-American (or to any other parochial) political semantics as part of distancing the original position from specific human particularities. These terms include, for example, "freedom," "democratic equality," and "fairness."

Take freedom. As Wierzbicka (1997, 125–55) has cogently shown, and as we illustrate more extensively in a subsequent section, the English concept of "freedom" cannot be easily translated across linguistic boundaries, since it is rooted not simply in the English language but

also in the particular political culture in which it has emerged, which can hardly be described as universal in any empirical sense. Yet this concept is central to the deliberation among the parties in the original position, especially with regard to the formulation of the first principle of justice, which is concerned with the protection of citizens' basic liberties. How can the parties in the original position reach any just decision with regard to what basic liberties (if any) ought to be protected by the state, if they use the English linguistic conception of "freedom," which is grounded in a specific and partial political epistemology?

Similarly, the concept of "democratic equality" is central to the deliberation among the parties in the original position in connection with the second principle of justice, which is concerned with the arrangement of social and economic inequalities, and especially with the formulation of the "difference principle" (Rawls 1999a, 65-73). Yet the concept of "democracy" cannot be easily translated across linguistic boundaries (e.g. Dupuis-Déri 2004, 118-34), at least without being sensitive to the risk of conflating its empirical realities with its universal normative presuppositions. As Frederic C. Schaffer argues, "Xhosa speakers today talk of *idemokrasi*, Chinese students demonstrated for *minzhu*, and Václav Havel attempted to institute *demokracie*. These examples are hardly trivial. Translating *minzhu*, *demokracie*, or *idemokrasi*, by 'democracy' as journalists and scholars regularly do, is potentially problematic because the cultural premises that infuse American practices and institutions may not be universal" (Schaffer 1998, 14; see also Freeden and Vincent 2013, 8). But then how can the parties in the original position deliberate about the best way of arranging social and economic inequalities on the basis of the idea of "democratic equality," if the English concept of "democracy" contains connotations, or semantic "overtones," that are not shared by its literal translations in other languages?

With regard to the concept of “fairness,” we have already highlighted its Lockean post-Enlightenment roots. One might then observe that the prudential and self-interested reasons that motivate the parties in the original position make it unnecessary for them to have a concept of fairness in order to be able to deliberate about the principles of justice. However, this objection overlooks the fact that for Rawls, while the parties in the original position are indeed self-interested, they are also “presumed to be capable of a sense of justice and this fact is public knowledge among them” (Rawls 1999a, 125). A sense of justice involves the willingness to comply with fair terms of cooperation and “it means that that the parties can rely on each other to understand and to act in accordance with whatever principles are finally agreed to” (Rawls 1999a, 125). It is “a tendency to answer in kind” (Rawls 1999a, 433) which “would appear to be a condition of human sociability” (Rawls 1999a, 433). According to Rawls, a purely self-interested kind of social cooperation, alike to the Hobbesian one, would not result in stable institutions and society. It is therefore necessary not only that “the principles of justice are agreed to in an initial situation that is fair” (Rawls 1999a, 11) but also that the parties in the original position share the same (linguistically-codified) concept of fairness.

Another objection might be that the idea of fairness is in fact not as parochial as we claim. For example, one might argue that the widely shared Golden Rule “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is, in fact, a concept of fairness. However, consider that “the golden rule shows two major sides: one promoting fairness and individual entitlement, conceived as reciprocity; the other promoting helpfulness and generosity to the end of social welfare” (Puka 2010). Rawls’s work, we have seen, grants significant importance to the idea of reciprocity as a key aspect of fairness. Yet it does not assign any significant importance to attitudes such as helpfulness and generosity, which are central to the Golden Rule. The latter, therefore, presents different connotations from the Rawlsian concept of fairness. It can also be argued that,

although the Golden Rule is assumed to be an ethical universal, such universality nevertheless requires empirical grounding. The fact that the Golden Rule exists in both Judeo-Christian and Confucian traditions does indeed mean it is not exclusive to either of them, but it does not conclusively follow from this that it is a universal property of human morality.

A final objection that we would like to consider is the claim that fairness, for Rawls, is a highly complex and technical philosophical concept, i.e. one that is distant from the everyday speech of ordinary citizens, regardless of their native language. To this, we would like to respond, first, that Rawls's theory is not as distant from everyday political and moral judgments as this objection suggests. After all, Rawls claims that the rationale for the original position thought-experiment also involves the idea that we should "see if the principles which would be chosen match our considered convictions of justice or extend them in an acceptable way" (Rawls 1999a, 17). Our everyday political and moral concepts therefore play an important role, according to Rawls, in the formulation of a theory of justice. Second, we would like to stress that the analyses of complex philosophical terms and of everyday political speech are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Examining the implications of linguistic relativity for such a sophisticated philosophical framework as the original position, that is, does not prevent us from also considering its effects on real-world deliberation. Indeed, the latter task is the one we aim to carry out in the next section.

For now, we would like to conclude the present analysis by stressing that the main challenge raised by the effects of linguistic relativity on the original position is therefore the establishment of a semantically linguistic epistemology that is sufficiently "calibrated," from which a shared framework of cooperative justice could eventually be generated. A better epistemically-informed version of the original position should seek greater epistemic

inclusiveness in discussing political ethics, a discussion that may therefore only take place with the incorporation of language into the process.

What would such an alternative version of the original position look like? Wierzbicka's critique of the tendency to mistake the English political vocabulary for the human norm is supported by a developing project on what is called the "Natural Semantic Metalanguage" (NSM) (Wierzbicka 2014, 33), a "decompositional system of meaning representation based on empirically established universal semantic primes" (Goddard 2010, 450), which aims to identify through cross-linguistic research the core set of semantic universals. This developing list of primes comprises, in effect, the "semantic Lego" of human language, with local exponents identified and tested across a broad range of languages, including English, Russian, Polish, French, Swedish, Malay, Japanese, Korean, Ewe and East Cree. The English exponents of the NSM include substantives such as "I," "you" and "someone," descriptors such as "big" and "small," evaluators such as "good" and "bad," actions such as "do," "happen" or "touch," and several others (Wierzbicka 2014, 34-5). This "epistemic Lego," in turn, enables the construction of more complex social and political notions, such as "cooperation," "altruism" (Wierzbicka 2014, 104-7) and "tolerance" (Gladkova 2008). Such complex and localized concepts cannot be the starting point of the discussion over shared values, because they fail to draw on an empirically-common ethical and political language (Wierzbicka 2014, 66-7).

This does not mean, of course, that the English exponents of the NSM should be preferred over their counterparts from other languages. The whole point of the NSM is that terms such as "I," "you," "someone," "good," and "bad," unlike terms such as "fairness," "freedom," and "democracy," *do* have substantive cross-linguistic literal translations, as empirical research

shows.<sup>4</sup> Therefore choosing the English version of the NSM instead of any of the other languages for which this framework has been tested and verified involves a negligible amount, if any, of epistemic or cultural bias. The choice between the different versions of the NSM is, in other words, as epistemically neutral as present research allows, and may be dictated by pragmatic reasons without unintentionally prioritizing one's particular epistemic standpoint. The use of the NSM would allow individuals who do not necessarily share a native language to nevertheless form and develop an epistemically-informed version of the Rawlsian original position, by using their language-specific NSM exponents as a linguistic "common ground."

An epistemically-informed original position therefore begins not with particularistic ethical vocabularies (e.g. "fairness"), but rather with these semantic "molecules" that are more easily shared, recognized and deliberated across linguistic and epistemic boundaries. Importantly, this proposed revision of the Rawlsian thought experiment intends to negotiate a middle ground between the seemingly effability<sup>5</sup> principle of the Rawlsian experiment (and, more broadly, of Anglo-American political philosophy) on the one hand, and the strong version of the linguistic relativity principle (i.e. linguistic determinism) on the other. The revised thought experiment is thus premised on the assumption that epistemic differences can and indeed ought to be bridged in the process of a collective reflection on the just state of society. Such bridging, however, requires closer and direct attention to linguistic epistemology, rather than the attempt to eliminate it from the picture altogether. For the original position to deliver on its promise to select principles of justice in a way that is genuinely unbiased, the NSM offers a theoretically

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Peeters (2006) for a detailed exploration of the NSM in Romance languages, Hasada (2008) on Japanese, Gladkova (2007) on Russian, and Maher (2002) on Italian.

<sup>5</sup> "Effability" refers to the view that "all natural languages possess...the capacity to express any idea" (Collin 2013, 283).



and methodologically capable tool for taking the linguistic pluralism of contemporary societies - and its epistemic effects on moral and political semantics - seriously.

“Re-coding” the original position, whether in English or in any other NSM-tested language, would be a very complex and time-consuming endeavour, and as such a task that is understandably well beyond the scope of this paper. It seems plausible to think that it might result in the same consensus illustrated by Rawls, or in a consensus on different principles of justice. The key point is that this would be a non-biased (or only minimally biased) kind of consensus, because the thought experiment would be grounded in an epistemically-informed linguistic framework. There is sufficient flexibility in the way the original position is designed, we believe, to accommodate the revisions we advocate.

- **3.2. Public Reason**

The idea of “public reason” is central to Rawls’s later work (Rawls 2005a; Rawls 2005b). In political liberalism, public reason is “the reason of equal citizens who, as a collective body, exercise final and coercive power over one another in enacting laws and in amending their constitution” (Rawls 2005a, 214). The goal of public reason is to guarantee the public justifiability and legitimacy of coercive legislation concerning fundamental matters in societies characterized by a pluralism of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Public reason places citizens under a moral “duty of civility” (Rawls 2005a, 217) to only appeal to political values rather than their comprehensive doctrines and conceptions of the good when making decisions about “‘constitutional essentials’ and questions of basic justice” (Rawls 2005a, 214), e.g. issues concerning “who has the right to vote, or what religions are to be tolerated, or who is to be assured fair equality of opportunity, or to hold property” (Rawls 2005a, 214).

Given that public reason applies to the real deliberation of real people in the real world, the kind of NSM analysis that, we argued, can contribute to a better epistemically-informed version of the original position, cannot realistically be applied to it, at least in most cases. For example, “no translator/interpreter will ever be allowed a 21-page parenthesis in the middle of a European Union speech by the German Chancellor” (Collin 2013, 17) in order to explain the difference between two German terms for “homeland,” i.e. *Heimat* and *Vaterland*, or to consult other useful materials, such as the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (Cassin 2014a). Admittedly, not all multilingual deliberative forums are truly deliberative. For example, in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, government officials from different states normally act as delegates and present positions that have already been worked out at the national level. In this sense, they are not involved in a true process of deliberation. Nevertheless, in many other cases actual multilingual deliberation does take place, as for instance in meetings of state leaders in the European Council, of ministers in the Council of the European Union, and of MEPs in the European Parliament.

Some scholars, especially political philosophers, might be tempted to argue that misunderstandings due to linguistic barriers can normally be overcome through deliberation, especially since the latter allows moving beyond word-by-word translations in order to explain the meaning of single words through complex and articulated sentences. However, while this might be possible, for example, in the context of academic seminars, where participants possess, alongside a comprehensive textual common ground, sufficient time, expertise and (one would hope) open-mindedness, the same is unlikely to apply to deliberations among politicians and, even more so, to everyday deliberations among ordinary citizens.

What implications, then, does linguistic relativity have for public reasoning? If linguistic diversity entails epistemic diversity, and if the use of the NSM in public deliberation is in most cases not a practical option, then public reasoning may only be possible if members of a political community share one language, and share it as a native (or near-native) language. This is because “each native language has trained its speakers to pay different kinds of attention to events and experiences when talking about them. This training is carried out in childhood and is exceptionally resistant to restructuring in adult second-language acquisition” (Slobin 1996a, 89). For example, English native speakers are “nudged” by the English grammar to focus on the progressive aspect of an action, whereas Spanish native speakers tend to focus on the distinction between perfective and imperfective aspects of an action and Turkish native speakers make a distinction between witnessed and non-witnessed actions (Slobin 1996a, 73-4). What is the significance of these differences for normative political thinking?

Take the latter example offered by Slobin, concerning the distinction between witnessed and non-witnessed actions in the Turkish language. This property, which linguists call evidentiality, namely “the grammatical means of expressing information sources” (Aikhenvald 2004, xi), enables (and sometimes obliges) speakers to make refined distinctions between information obtained, for example, firsthand or non-firsthand, information that is received directly, inferred or assumed, and information obtained visually or non-visually. As well as marking speakers as credible and trustworthy based on their competency in the use of evidentials (Aikhenvald 2004, 9-10, 357-358), evidentiality systems are also been reported to develop a higher degree of metalinguistic awareness. The importance of evidentials for metalinguistic awareness is “reflected in the ways people can discuss evidentials and explain why one evidential and not another was used in a particular circumstance” (Aikhenvald 2003, 360). Such metalinguistic awareness has a clear political dimension since it enables speakers to construct – and contest –

social and political articulations. For example, many Macedonian speakers have criticized a Macedonian politician's choice to opt for a frequent firsthand evidential in a book on Alexander the Great, which seemingly suggested him as the direct heir to Alexander (Aikhenvald 2004, 317). This metalinguistic awareness is also enhanced by being aware of the lack of corresponding systems in other languages through language contact (e.g. speakers of Turkic and Balkan languages with proficiency in English). Switching between languages with and without evidential systems is a demanding cognitive task, as "those who speak a language with evidentiality find it hard to adjust to the vagueness of information sources in many familiar European languages such as English, Portuguese, and varieties of Spanish other than those spoken in the Andes" (Aikhenvald 2004, 360).

Similarly, speakers of different languages are often "nudged" by their language to focus on different aspects of a certain ethical or political concept. For example, the terms "citizenship" and "nationality" are often translated into other languages as if they were interchangeable (Collin 2013, 291-292), despite the legal connotations of the former and the ethnic connotations of the latter. Likewise, as Audard and Raynoud note, "liberal designates a progressive or social-democratic attitude in the United States, but in France the word signals an opposition to the welfare state" (Audard and Raynoud 2014, 570). Other key concepts of political deliberation that do not necessarily "travel well" cross-linguistically include "democracy" (Dupuis-Déri 2004, 118-34), "peace" (Ishida 1969, 133-45) and "freedom" (Wierzbicka 1997, 125-55).

Let us consider, for example, the term "freedom," and imagine that English and Russian native speakers are engaged in public reasoning in English about legislation concerning free speech and privacy. The English word "freedom" differs quite significantly in its meaning from the Russian word *svoboda*, even though it is normally used as the latter's standard translation in

English. More specifically, *svoboda* conveys the idea of “a ‘loosening’ of some sort of material or psychological straitjacket” (Wierzbicka 1997, 140), linked to “the need to ‘spread out’, to ‘overflow’ any bounds like a flooding river” (Wierzbicka 1997, 142) in order to achieve “an exhilarating sense of well-being” (Wierzbicka 1997, 141; see also Vasylchenko 2014). The strongly anarchic connotations of the term *svoboda* differ significantly from those of the English term freedom, which “is not incompatible with restrictions and constraints; on the contrary, it suggests a perspective from which constraints imposed by the law can be seen as necessary to guarantee the inviolability of everyone’s personal space” (Wierzbicka 1997, 144).

When applied to public reasoning about free speech and privacy, this linguistic epistemic gap can have significant implications. More specifically, while English native speakers using the word “freedom” will be “nudged” to think that guaranteeing freedom of speech is in principle compatible with imposing legal constraints on it (e.g. in order to guarantee people’s privacy, the infringement of which can legitimately be considered a harm, and an infringement on other people’s freedom), Russian speakers (who are non-native English speakers) will assume that the word “freedom” is a more or less problem-free translation of *svoboda*. They will therefore be “nudged” to think that in English “freedom of speech” implies a total lack of constraints on the speaker, e.g. even if their speech potentially infringes upon the privacy of other people.

Or consider, to use a different example, the English expression “family values,” which among native English speakers (especially in the US) is normally and almost unconsciously associated with “the ‘traditional’ nuclear family and...[with disapproval]...of homosexual marriage or gay adoption or sexuality outside marriage” (Collin 2013, 295). This expression is normally used as a literal translation of the Danish term *familieværdier* which, however, presents different connotations and emphasizes “society’s responsibility to provide daycare centres,

parental leave after childbirth and medical care for children, a far cry from opposition to gay marriage” (Collin 2013, 295). Thus, when engaged in public reasoning in English with regard to the state provision of free childcare, many English and Danish speakers will be using at some point the English term “family values” in order to support or reject that measure or to specify how it should be implemented in more detail.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of their specific position on the issue (e.g. some of them may be socially conservative, others more liberal), native English speakers will be “nudged” to associate “family values” with what is normally considered as the traditional nuclear family. Similarly, many Danish speakers will also be using the English term “family values” during that deliberation. However, many of them are likely to use that expression as the literal translation of the Danish word *familieværdier* as non-native English speakers who quite possibly, like their English counterparts, have no particular knowledge of the specific semantic baggage of that word in English (i.e. they have not been taught English in an epistemically-informed way). Therefore, regardless of their specific position on the issue (e.g. some of them may be egalitarian, others libertarian), those Danish speakers will be “nudged” to think that “family values” almost implicitly involve the state provision of free childcare and they will not draw any distinction between married and unmarried or gay couples when using that term, because that distinction is not central to the semantic baggage of the term *familieværdier*.

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<sup>6</sup> Note that while “family values” and *familieværdier* refer to non-political values, their use in public reasoning is allowed by Rawls’s “wide” view of public reason, according to which non-public reasons “may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons – and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines – are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines introduced are said to support” (Rawls 2005b, 462).

While these examples are hypothetical, they are nevertheless grounded in an empirical analysis of cross-linguistic moral and political keywords. However, many non-hypothetical examples can also be offered. For instance, Szalazay (1981) shows how the English term “corruption” presents different connotations from its Korean translation *bupae* (부패). While both terms present negative connotations, Szalay explains, the English term emphasizes the immoral and criminal nature of the act, whereas the Korean term only stresses the negative effects of the action on the smooth function of political and social institutions (Szalay 1981, p. 141). This semantic discrepancy can have significant effects on negotiations between English and Korean native speakers (Cohen 2004, 28).

Likewise, Raymond Cohen (2004) shows that when political negotiations involve “compromise” and “concessions,” participants should be aware that the literal translation of these English terms in other languages do not always have the same (mainly positive) connotations that they have in English. In Arabic, for example, terms such as *Khaleena nitjaham* or *Musawama* refer to mutual concessions which involve reciprocal compromise. The term *Tanazol*, instead, involves one-sided concessions and presents a “negative, shameful connotation” (Cohen 2004, 108). Cohen therefore points out that it is important for Anglophone negotiators to specify what kind of concessions they would like to discuss with their Arabic counterparts, and translate key terms carefully and accurately, as this may affect the very structure of negotiations. (Cohen 2004, 109).

Similarly, as Brigid Maher (2002) points out, the Italian term *raccomandare* is inadequately captured by its usual glossing as “recommend” or “entrust,” as neither of these lexical elements conveys its meaning as “saying to someone that you would like them to help a certain other person in need of some kind of assistance or protection. Often this assistance may be in the

form of lenience regarding a punishment, or favour in a search for work, with exams or with some complicated bureaucratic process” (Maher 2002, 42).

One final example is that of “martyr,” particularly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where it is a longstanding topic of political and ideological tension. The Arabic notion of *shaheed* (شهيد) “is broadly used in everyday discourse to refer to anyone on the receiving end of violence in a situation of conflict, whether or not they choose to be involved in that situation” (Baker 2007, 66). The Hebrew *qadosh* (קדוש), by contrast, “[has] become standard usage for Jews being killed by non-Jews in a variety of contexts” (Hasan-Rokem 2008, 593), one important of which is the Holocaust, whose (Jewish) victims are often referred to as *qedoshim* (pl. of *qadosh*) (Hasan-Rokem 2008, 594). Israeli Hebrew speakers are often unaware that *shaheed* “is not necessarily... part of a narrative of violent resistance” (Baker 2007, 66), despite the fact that the same term is actually used by the Druze community to refer to Druze soldiers in the Israeli army who were killed in action. However, the presumed semantic (and moral) equivalence between *shaheed* and *qadosh*, with the former referring, among other things, to Palestinians voluntarily involved in acts of terror on one hand, and the latter referring to their victim, is the source of deep tension in Israeli political discourse.

Given the problems raised by linguistic relativity for real-time public reasoning and deliberation, we therefore argue that political liberalism paradoxically demands the teaching of a common civic language from an early age to all its citizens and residents (e.g. at nursery or primary school level at the latest), if the latter are expected to be able to participate in public reasoning on equal epistemic terms. This is because, as we have seen, deconstructing linguistic utterances through the NSM is simply not an option in real deliberation (e.g. in town hall meetings, during electoral speeches, in parliamentary debates, etc.). Sharing a common civic



language as a native or near-native language means that, at least, citizens and residents share the same unreflective understanding of ethical and political concepts such as fairness, *wa* or *ubuntu* in their respective linguistic civic spheres.

Four objections should be considered at this point. First, one might observe that most political concepts are “essentially contested” (Gallie 1956, 167-98; see also Chilton 2008, 228) *intralinguistically* as well as *interlinguistically*. Yet linguistic relativity renders contestation over the meaning of political (and other) concepts much more complex due to its *unconscious* epistemic effects, and it is especially *this* that risks undermining public reasoning. Moreover, we would like to stress again that even when speakers become aware of their linguistically-nudged epistemic bias, it is quite unrealistic for them to resort to the NSM lexicon in order to accurately translate concepts in different languages in real-world and real-time public deliberation.

Second, and relatedly, one might also observe that there are often significant regional and class differences in the way different people learn and speak *the same language*, and that this may lead them to apprehend the same political concept (i.e. its core meaning) in different (linguistically-codified) ways which nudge them towards different non-core meanings. It is not implausible, therefore, to argue that this will result in intralinguistic linguistic relativity effects on political language<sup>7</sup> and, consequently, that this may have negative effects on public reasoning. We acknowledge this problem and recognize that it might be difficult to fully avoid it. However, as we will show in the next section, it should be noted that the teaching of a common civic language, on its own, could never eliminate the effects of linguistic relativity, due to the changing linguistic landscape of contemporary diverse societies in an age of

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Pederson (2007).

increased human mobility. The presence of intralinguistic linguistic relativity effects, therefore, should not be seen as a threat to an otherwise epistemically-coordinated demos.

Third, it might be observed that our proposal for a shared civic language amounts to a form of linguistic homogenization, which would be especially problematic in officially bilingual or multilingual states (e.g. Canada, Belgium, etc.). In response to this point, it should be noted that such states already often display a high level of linguistic homogenization within each of their constituent linguistic communities (e.g. English-speaking and French-speaking communities in Canada, Flemish-speaking and French-speaking communities in Belgium, etc.). This kind of homogenization can potentially be oppressive and unjust for speakers of the non-official language(s), especially when grounded in the adoption of territorial (rather than personal) language rights that often characterizes less accommodating language regimes (e.g. Belgium and Switzerland). A regime of territorial language rights implies that “languages should be territorially accommodated, such that on each particular territorial unit only one language group is present or officially recognized” (De Schutter 2008, 105). Our solution, therefore, does not raise any more problems than such accounts of linguistic justice as those offered, for example, by Philippe Van Parijs (Van Parijs 2011) and Will Kymlicka (Kymlicka 2001), who endorse the principle of linguistic territoriality. Furthermore, even within states that embrace official bilingualism or multilingualism (i.e. the official state recognition of more than one language), it may be necessary for members of different linguistic communities to share at least one common civic language for deliberation and public reasoning beyond (native) linguistic boundaries in a process of “linguistic retooling” (Safran 2004, 12-13). For example, in India over 20 official languages are officially recognized across the various states, but Hindi and English are also widely spoken at the federal level. Lastly and relatedly, as we argue in the next section, the teaching and learning of a shared civic language does not prevent (and, in fact,

should be accompanied by) the teaching and learning of other languages in order for all citizens to acquire linguistic repertoires. It is therefore important to stress that while we are indifferent, for the purpose of the present analysis, to the question whether states should adopt official monolingualism or multilingualism (as long as citizens also share at least one common civic language), we do endorse personal multilingualism, i.e. the ability of individual citizens (and non-citizens) to develop a linguistic repertoire greater than one.

Fourth, one might point out that by advocating the need for a shared civic language we are simply reintroducing a bias similar to the one associated with the Anglophone political vocabulary that we have previously criticized. After all, if English political language has been deeply shaped by liberalism, is it not likely that any language chosen as the shared civic language of a political community will be equally shaped by some (liberal or non-liberal) moral vision? This objection, we believe, slightly misses the point of our analysis. The problem raised by linguistic relativity effects on political language is an epistemic rather than a moral one. That is, it aims to highlight the epistemic moral “frictions” between members of a political community who do not necessarily share a single language as native speakers, rather than to arbitrate which view is morally preferable to the others. Sharing a common civic language would nudge members of a political community to think about political and moral concepts in the same way but it would not necessarily make them agree on the value of those political and moral concepts.

As we mentioned in one of our earlier examples, for instance, Danish native speakers are nudged to think about *familieværdier* in the same way, i.e. as a term that connects family values with the state provision of social welfare, but do not necessarily agree that this welfare-based approach is valuable or just. Neoliberal, free-market oriented Danish native speakers, that is,

are likely to criticize *familieværdier*. Or take, to use another example, gender equality. It is well-known that the English language is less gendered than other languages, as shown for example by terms such as “friend” or “politician”, which are translated, respectively, as “*amico*” (male) or “*amica*” (female) in Italian, and “*politicien*” (male) or “*politicienne*” (female) in French (Collin 2013, 293). There is an ongoing endeavour to neutralize the gender bias of the English vocabulary, as testified for example by the gradual replacement of terms such as “actress,” “stewardess” and “policeman” with the gender-neutral versions “actor,” “flight attendant” and “police officer,” or by the 150-year (and going) search for English gender-neutral pronouns (Baron 2010). Yet it would be wrong to claim that being a native English speaker makes a person automatically a supporter of gender equality. We believe that while cultural changes can affect changes in the lexicon and grammar of a language, and the latter can nudge us to understand certain concepts in certain (morally and culturally influenced) ways, this does not imply that speaking a certain language will cognitively “program” us endorse the moral and cultural views that have produced those changes.

#### **4. Political Metalinguistic Awareness**

The linguistic landscape of contemporary societies is constantly in flux and, while state education, as we argued in the previous section, may contribute in reinforcing linguistic (and epistemic) convergence, it can never fully realize it. Notably, continuing migratory fluxes imply that linguistic differences and, consequently, epistemic differences, are likely to remain present. This is especially the case if the learning of a second language in adulthood does not necessarily enable the learner to fully interiorize the epistemic framework that such a language carries with it. Furthermore, as we have already acknowledged, even in the presence of a shared civic language, regional and class differences affecting the way individuals apprehend political concepts in a linguistically codified way may remain.

Developing an awareness of the partiality of one's linguistic and epistemic perspectives seems, therefore, to be an important civic imperative in multilingual political communities. As defenders of weak linguistic relativity argue, speakers are normally unaware of the fact that they are being "guided" by their language in their experience of the world, or "pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation...[which lead them to]...somewhat different views of the world" (Whorf 1956, 221) It is therefore important that speakers within linguistically diverse societies "de-automatize...[their]...own language categories" (Lucy 1992, 37) and acquire what we would like to call "*political* metalinguistic awareness." The acquisition of *political* metalinguistic awareness, i.e. a metalinguistic awareness that focuses on political terms and ideas, is, we argue, important for both political philosophy and political practice, for understanding the substance, so to speak, of political debates and their epistemic limitations. While the NSM provides in principle a useful tool for unveiling unconscious linguistic presuppositions about the political world, we have already seen that this is a task for which perhaps only professional academics may have the necessary time, technical expertise and interest. If this is the case, then, how can political metalinguistic awareness be promoted and developed on a more pragmatic and inclusive level among non-philosophers?

One suggestion would be for the state to encourage (or even require) citizens to learn at least one more language, alongside their mother tongue(s) (i.e. a heritage language) and the shared native or near-native civic language. Moreover, children of immigrants could be encouraged not to abandon their parents' language(s), whereas those who would have learnt the shared civic language anyway (e.g. because it is the native language spoken by their parents) could be encouraged to develop their linguistic repertoire by learning foreign languages. Embracing second/foreign language education is, of course, far from being a pedagogical novelty, as is

reflected in standard language curricula across the world, particularly outside the English-speaking world. However, grounding second/foreign language education in the explicit goal of developing one's metalinguistic awareness has not been previously proposed by political philosophers, as far as we are aware. Being in possession of a linguistic repertoire that is greater than one can be argued to make individuals more conscious of the ways in which different languages affect their understanding of the world, their moral reflection and political agency in multilingual societies, and their complex moral vocabularies. Only by engaging with other languages can we become aware of the partial perspective of our own native language(s), the shared civic language, and the fact that different conceptions of justice may result from different linguistically-shaped epistemic frameworks. To briefly return to a point made in the previous section, we would like to stress that while official multilingualism may not necessarily contribute to the development of political metalinguistic awareness, especially in highly territorial linguistic regimes (e.g. Switzerland) that do not necessarily encourage day-to-day multilingual interaction among members of society, individual multilingualism is more likely to do so.

One might then point out that learning two or more languages in childhood *per se* may not contribute to a person's political metalinguistic awareness as it may simply impose additional "mental/linguistic straightjackets" to the one already represented by one's native language(s). In response to this objection we would like to stress, first, that acquiring greater metalinguistic awareness does not mean freeing oneself entirely from the conventions and "nudges" of one's native language; rather, it enables speakers to understand the contextual nature of their linguistic thinking and behaviour, an understanding that is nearly-impossible to achieve in the absence of an additional language against whom linguistic intuitions, or judgments, may be checked and tested. Moreover, owing to cross-linguistic influence in bilinguals, as Pavlenko

notes, “even the most fluent and bi- and multilinguals’ metalinguistic judgments, conceptual representations, word associations and language processing rates may be distinct from those of monolingual speakers” (Pavlenko 2014, 24). Second, we acknowledge that the promotion of linguistic repertoires through formal education (which is already widely practiced) is likely not to be sufficient for the kind of highly refined moral conceptual metalinguistic awareness that we discuss here. We therefore would like to argue that this measure should be accompanied by the incorporation of linguistics into the curriculum to complement the formal learning of specific languages. This, we believe, would enable pupils to develop a higher-order understanding of language in society and culture beyond the purely instrumental or technical. The aim of this measure would be to educate individuals to the effects that the continuous interaction between language and different social variables (e.g. class, region, gender, ethnicity, etc.) has both between and within languages, and thus enhance their metalinguistic awareness. Such enhanced linguistic education is more likely to foster not only a greater sensitivity to the rich and complex nature of linguistic interaction in a multilingual society, but also qualities such as creativity, adaptability, humility, sensitivity to forms of symmetrical/asymmetrical cooperation, and the capacity to engage with multiple forms of non-linguistic representations.

The inclusion of linguistics in school curricula should aim to avoid or reduce the epistemic misunderstandings that, as we have shown in the many examples above, often arise when political actors engage in deliberation. In other words, linguistic education ought to comprise the teaching of particular languages not as autonomous or abstracted systems, but rather as situated webs of linguistic labels that encode and connote contextualized notions - social, political and otherwise. Such enhanced linguistic education would enable learners, whether native or non-native, to become aware of the semantic peculiarities of natural languages, their

overt and covert “nudges,” and the questionable presupposition of perfect translation. The development of political metalinguistic awareness may likewise be pursued through related curricular subjects such as civics, social studies and comparative religion. Such proposals are, understandably, indicative rather than exhaustive, and specific policy recommendations and curricular outlines will certainly need to involve input from relevant researchers and practitioners in education. Neil Postman’s writings on the philosophy and pedagogy of linguistic education in the United States is one insightful example of how metalinguistic awareness may be successfully taught already in primary education (Postman 1966; 1995).

We believe that the acquisition of individual linguistic repertoires and the development of political metalinguistic awareness on their basis should be viewed as pivotal for the civic life and civic education of multilingual political communities. Alongside the importance of one’s reflexive awareness of their language-based biases, the development of individual linguistic repertoires may also be argued to be an important cooperative signal, reflecting the individual’s commitment to identifying a shared epistemic “common ground” for deliberating about the just society in multilingual contexts. It is true, of course, that there might be practical limits to the development of linguistic repertoires. But it seems plausible to nevertheless argue that second/foreign language learning is not only feasible, but also that its “payoff” should be considered in more than strict monetary terms, in recognition of its contribution to creating a stronger sense of epistemic coherence.

The normative claim that underlies our discussion is that citizens in multilingual societies ought to establish an *epistemic cooperation* in order to share the epistemic burdens resulting from linguistic diversity, and that the state, where possible, should encourage and enable them to do so through its language and education policies. Failing to do so would amount to disqualifying



many people's notion(s) of the good life and the just state of society simply on the ground that they are imported from a "foreign" (i.e. non-majority and/or non-official) language. The learning of additional languages, and the adoption of other measures aimed at promoting political metalinguistic awareness, should not be seen as contradicting our earlier support of a shared civic language. Sharing a common linguistic epistemological framework is of fundamental importance for the kind of public reasoning that underlies the Rawlsian political project. However, given the constitutive linguistic diversity of contemporary societies, especially in light of increasing global mobility, a fully-common language is more aspirational than a reality, and therefore cannot fully eliminate the effects of linguistic relativity on political language. Only through the acquisition of political metalinguistic awareness, we have therefore argued, can members of linguistically diverse political communities become aware of the different epistemic frameworks associated with different languages, and thus work towards ensuring that political institutions acknowledge and reflect that diversity, rather than ignore it.

### **5. A Diligent Epistemic Potluck**

The challenges posed by linguistic relativity effects to political liberalism, we have thus far argued, necessitate the state imposition of a shared (native or near-native) civic language, alongside a fairer distribution of burdens involving linguistic epistemic resources. However, this inexorable linguistic reality of irreducible epistemic differences should not be viewed only as an unfortunate state of affairs, espousing the traditionalist moral of the tower of babel narrative within political liberalism. Rather, we would like to suggest in this concluding section, this plurality of political ethics should be viewed as an important epistemic resource that could successfully and usefully be capitalized upon by liberal democratic polities.

This precise logic underlies - perhaps surprisingly - Herder's *On Diligence in Several Learned Languages*, an early and often overlooked text exploring the question whether "nature imposes on us an obligation only to our mother tongue" (Herder 1992, 30) and concluding that, through the study of foreign languages, "we will penetrate so much more deeply the distinctiveness of each language. Here we will find gaps, there superficiality; here riches, there a desert; and we will be able to enrich the poverty of one with the treasure of another" (Herder 1992, 33). In other words, no language is epistemically self-sufficient. Since each language contains its own treasures and gaps, the way to fill these gaps is by drawing on the treasures of the others, that is, to pool together these epistemic resources by expanding our linguistic repertoire. *On Diligence* therefore calls for the type of epistemic cooperation proposed in this paper, justifying it not as an unfortunate result of human difference, but rather as a hopeful endeavour that benefits everyone involved.

This joint pooling of epistemic resources could be described as a kind of "epistemic potluck." On that view, individuals who do not necessarily share a linguistic epistemology bring each to the communal table their different concepts of political ethics and the core keywords and notions featured by different ethical traditions. This kind of community table, where English political ethics are complemented by their Japanese, Zulu, Hebrew and Maori counterparts, seems like a more hopeful venue for an epistemically-enhanced debate on what is a good (and bad) society. Importantly, having a multilingual conceptual menu does not intend to erode or supplant local ethical traditions, just as it is wary of the unhelpful romantic tendency to essentialize linguistic communities. Our argument here is simply that, if different languages indeed do encode different ethical traditions, then taking note of this diverse range of political ethics is likely to result in a more profound reflection on our own held political concepts, their strengths and their limitations. If we spot some gap in our own political language, we may well

be able to follow on Herder's advice and fill it with the treasure of another. The more ethical traditions our individual and collective linguistic repertoires allow us to access, the greater range of potentially useful treasures we may find there.

This kind of epistemic potluck has some strong empirical roots outside philosophy. As biologist Jack Cohen and mathematician Ian Stewart argue, humanity's apparent uniqueness in possessing consciousness, complex language and culture is grounded not purely in human *intelligence* (what happens *inside* the mind of individual humans), but rather in its interplay with human *extelligence*; in other words, in individuals' ability to pool together information jointly and across generations (Stewart and Cohen 1997, esp. ch. 10) The interdependence between intelligence and extelligence therefore plays a pivotal role in the unique emergence of humanity. Cohen and Stewart admittedly do not focus on the pooling of epistemic resources, defining "extelligence" as shared cultural capital, e.g. tribal legends, folklore, books, videotapes (Stewart and Cohen 1997, 243). However, the fundamental logic of their argument clearly applies to our discussion: the more we know together, the better-off we are. The more *political extelligence* we possess, i.e. the larger pooled sum of knowledge we have on moral and political thinking across different ethical traditions as encoded in different languages, the more informed we are in the continual process of shaping our political beliefs, practices and institutions.

The notion of "political extelligence" captures the importance of paying attention to language as part of both the empirical and normative study of politics. Looking outside the Anglo-American world, and sharing knowledge with (and of) speakers of other languages, by recognizing their importance and equal epistemic standing, should be viewed as an important source for working in political ethics, descriptive, normative or applied. Identifying and

redressing language-based epistemic bias, therefore, benefits everyone - political scientists, philosophers and actors. Furthermore, speakers of majority languages stand to gain just as much as their minority counterparts, as they can thus be enabled to properly capitalize on their linguistic advantage while being aware of its important limitations and communicative and epistemic self-insufficiency.

The importance of political extelligence extends beyond that of a mere intellectual interest confined to self-contained and highly professional discussions amongst philosophers. Rather, it has immediate and very real implications for the working, for example, of multilingual political bodies. Consider for instance recent research on the work of Anglophone members of European Parliament (MEPs), showing that successful communication with non-Anglophone MEPs is reliant on the extent to which Anglophone MEPs are linguistically-aware. Those who are, it has been found, derive some advantage from being native English speakers, but “they only have this advantage because they are language-aware. They are alert to the linguistic practices and political traditions that are national and which have no place in the EP. They can accommodate linguistically, negotiate and co-construct meaning” (Wright 2015, 121). Native Anglophones who are not language-aware, by contrast, “[perform] extremely poorly in the multilingual setting of the EP even though, in theory, they can work in their first language (usually their only language). This malfunction stems from an extremely rigid view of language; they use English as they would with a homogeneous group of native speakers. They fail to understand the mediated dimension of communication in the EP. Their linguistic insensitivity obstructs accommodation and negotiation. They regularly misconstrue meaning and they often fail to get their own message across to their heterogeneous audience” (Wright 2015, 121). Therefore, while an English-dominated working environment undoubtedly confers a certain advantage on native English speakers, it is, paradoxically, their capacity to be aware

of their linguistic particularities and adapt accordingly that helps them to successfully capitalize on that advantage. Or, in other words, their language-awareness makes them more politically extelligent in comparison with those who are not language-aware, and enables them to capitalize much more successfully on their greater sensitivity to language as a vehicle of political communication which is not as transparent as it is often perceived – or hoped – to be.

More “interactionist” models of political thinking, particularly deliberative and participatory democracy, may therefore benefit significantly from recognizing the broader extent of the “epistemic potluck” characterizing multilingual and multicultural polities, and from taking full advantage of the opportunities that it provides. But even more procedural approaches to politics, including procedural justice, as our discussion of Rawls demonstrates, may well find in it a useful resource upon which to capitalize in the process of formulating and testing moral theories in an irreducibly linguistically-diverse epistemic world.

## **6. Conclusion**

Reflecting over the impossibility of neutrality in language, Quine comments that “[i]t is not clear even in principle that it makes sense to think of words and syntax as varying from language to language while content stays fixed” (Quine 1953, 61). Such thinking, however, seems to be a general feature of a significant body of work in contemporary normative analytical political philosophy, whether in the context of the linguistic justice debate, or more broadly in the literature on multiculturalism and democratic deliberation, which fails to consider epistemic variance in its discussion of democracy and difference. The invisibility of language-based epistemic differences therefore often results in the presence of epistemic bias in normative frameworks which, like the Rawlsian one, perceive themselves as impartial and procedural. The type of cooperative justice these frameworks therefore advance, even if

unwittingly, is premised on an asymmetric rather than symmetric cooperation, which places an inequitable duty of linguistic convergence on linguistic and cultural minorities, by perceiving them as epistemically inferior to their linguistic majority peers.

Furthermore, failing to consider different language-based political ethics involves, for linguistic majorities and political communities more broadly, an unnecessarily reduced menu at the civic epistemic potluck, as well as a diminished political extelligence, in the ongoing process of reflecting on and shaping the just society. “Knowing more things together” on the broad range of political ethics that are available to us, by considering ethical vocabularies from other traditions, does not compel us to adopt moral relativism. Rather, it allows us to be more conscious of our own moral beliefs, their origins, substance and limitations. Such examination of the effects of linguistic relativity, within and beyond Rawls’s work, illuminates the important contribution of a closer attention to linguistic epistemology in the process of formulating, testing and critiquing theories and concepts in contemporary political philosophy. It likewise offers even larger gains for political science more broadly, as the overarching field of inquiry into political thinking in a linguistically complex and “messy” world.

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