

Can We Afford to be Without Multilingualism?

A Scientist's Lay Perspective¹

» PETER HØJ

(1) A PERSONAL LANGUAGE JOURNEY: DEFINING MOMENTS, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

*L*anguages have played a crucial role in my life, and while I am here today as a lay commentator, I am also delighted to have received a 'courageous' invitation from the Academy's Language Studies Committee to share with you my simple views on the need for improved linguistic competence in Australia, a country of rich but arguably unrealised language potential. I will seemingly jump from a traditional use of the term 'language', for example English and Chinese, to a broader

tongue has directly contributed to the success I have enjoyed in both my working and personal lives. In a small way it has also allowed me to inform and be informed by important policy debates in this country from an Australian and Scandinavian perspective.

Despite this perceived advantage, my language journey has not always been easy. In fact, I encountered my first obstacle at the age of seven. I had been held back from starting school at the age of six because of my difficulties in enunciation.

Intensive lessons with a speech pathologist eventually resolved the problem, though I continued to struggle with articulating the

WHILE THE REST OF THE WORLD GOES ABOUT HONING THEIR ENGLISH FLUENCY,
MONOGLOT AUSTRALIANS ARE FAILING TO RECIPROCATE.

use and introduce the concept of disciplinary monolingualism. I hope it will make sense as I try to synthesise those concepts.

Let me begin by reflecting on my own unremarkable but nevertheless illustrative language journey. It is true to say I would not be where I am today without the advantages of bilingualism. Nor would I have had the meaningful cultural exchanges that have enriched my life and opened up doors of opportunity that would have otherwise remained closed. For me, being able to think, dream and express myself in more than one

meaning of the material I was reading in class. I hazard a guess that I understood the reading material perfectly well, but due to an inability to communicate this understanding, I was not able to have an effective exchange with my teacher and was marked accordingly. The lesson this experience taught me, and the disadvantage of not being understood and excluded from meaningful engagement, has stayed with me for the rest of my life.

Growing up in Denmark certainly had particular advantages. As a small country of only five million people, it has always

(above)

Montage background:
Lost Camel Patterns
by Maureen Keogh.

REPRINTED WITH THE
ARTIST'S PERMISSION.
<WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/MIMIK/>

understood the considerable risk of its citizens not being able to communicate in languages other than their own mother tongue. As a matter of course we were taught English and German as core subjects in the middle years of school and compulsory French for three years in senior high school. Latin was also offered as an option in high school, but was mandatory for entry into Medicine. And this was just the minimum language requirement: students who wished to commence their language education earlier or continue it for longer could certainly do so.

Extensive language tuition has benefited me hugely later in life, but was also a valued asset during my younger years as a Eurail-tripper around the continent. Despite some minor language indiscretions along the way, I have generally found that the attempt to speak to locals in their native language has brought about both tangible and intangible benefits, one being the cultural capital accrued for 'having a go' at linguistic competence.

What I have discovered since leaving school is that my fortunes have only grown with my increasing ability to communicate in the language of my audience. This language is not necessarily English, German or Danish or any other *lingua franca*, but instead a particular *cultural* language that is spoken within a specific disciplinary or contextual setting. For example, the ability to communicate in a relatively sophisticated research language while touring the Riverland in South Australia and enjoying the offer of home-stays with research levy-paying grape growers in mixed farming enterprises as a Foundation Professor in Viticultural Science at Adelaide University springs to mind. As such it is not always the particular language that is important, but the overriding ability to communicate with meta-awareness that is key. It is this skill that has unique and powerful advantages in international, multicultural and cross-disciplinary contexts.

(2) POSITIONING STATEMENT: THE RISK OF MONOLINGUALISM

We are living in an era of 'Global English'. In his report titled *English Next*,² British linguist David Graddol estimates that in the near

future around two billion people will be fluent in English, with this figure climbing to three billion in the next forty years. The proliferation of English across world cultures is astonishing. It is therefore vital for Australia's cultural and economic wellbeing that our citizens are accomplished users and vectors of English: our ability to understand one another and be understood internationally depends on it.

However, the mass spread of global English comes with a warning. As the ability to communicate in English becomes a standard skill for millions of educated people, there is a risk that English will lose its privileged status and become commonplace in many parts of the world. Those who can speak only English, as is the case for a large fraction of Australians,

(below)

Peter Høj meeting Chinese Premier Wen Jia Bao in 2006 on the occasion of celebrating the Chinese National Science Foundation's twenty-year anniversary.

AUTHOR'S OWN PHOTOGRAPH.



will lose their linguistic advantage to those who can speak English *and* one or more other international tongue(s).³

English is already being rivalled by Hindi and Spanish for the number of speakers, though Mandarin continues to dominate with the largest number of speakers of any mother-tongue language. This I believe will have some inevitable consequences.

We can, in my view, not afford to be complacent and put all our faith in the enduring relevance of English alone. While

the rest of the world goes about honing their English fluency, monoglot Australians are failing to reciprocate by learning the languages of our major cultural and trading partners. By putting all of our eggs into the English-only basket, we may run a risk of relative cultural and economic isolation.

In the words of the University of Melbourne's Professor Joseph Lo Bianco, 'It is a disadvantage to not know English, and it is a disadvantage to know only English'.⁴

(3) DISCLAIMER 1

Before proceeding any further, I would like to pause and offer two important disclaimers.

The first is that I am a biochemist and not a humanities researcher. I do not come from a scholarly background in linguistics and I make no claim to being an authority on language strategy. I am merely here as an advocate for

speaking nations on that list represent seventy-six percent of the total Australian wine exports. What is especially noteworthy is that Germany is the biggest importer of wine in the world by a good margin, and yet our exports to both the UK and the USA are each more than tenfold those to Germany. I hypothesise that the skewed nature of our exports can to a large extent be attributed to the comfort we take in dealing with countries for which English is the shared and official language.

Similar disadvantages seem to be reflected in the ongoing debate about how best to organise and fund Australia's higher education system. Australia traditionally benchmarks the performance of its higher education and innovation systems against those in the USA and UK. However, there are countries with smaller but strong economies such as Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden and Finland, which clearly outperform the USA and the UK

'IT IS A DISADVANTAGE TO NOT KNOW ENGLISH, AND IT IS A DISADVANTAGE TO KNOW ONLY ENGLISH'. - PROFESSOR JOSEPH LO BIANCO

the breaking down of language and discipline barriers, a cause the Academy has actively engaged in by inviting me to deliver the seventh Louis Triebel Lecture.

I have, however, spent almost three years as the CEO of the Australian Research Council and during that time I came to appreciate the enormous contributions humanities scholars can make to society. At the same time I also realised that such scholars can suffer disadvantage if they fail to use the language most appropriate to a broader target audience.

In my former life as Managing Director of the Australian Wine Research Institute, I saw first-hand how language, or the limitations of language, may have dictated the kind of international trade relationships the wine industry pursued and the kind of export opportunities that were subsequently missed.

Australia's wine exports in 2007/8 were worth \$2.66 billion and the major export markets were, in descending order, the UK, the USA, Canada, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Ireland, Denmark, China and Germany, with the vast majority of exports going to the UK, the USA and Canada. Indeed, the English-

in publications and citations per capita and which, in the views of many, have superior economic, cultural and social performance characteristics. Interestingly, these countries do not have universities in the top twenty on the Jiao Tong World University Rankings. Yet we still seem to chase the dream of individual institutional USA and UK type glory rather than having overall 'systems excellence' as the key national driver. Do you really believe that a Nobel Prize won in 1914 tells us a lot about institutional capacity in 2009?

Additionally, the 2008 Boyer Lecture on Education, delivered by Rupert Murdoch, held up countries like Korea and Finland, but then concentrated entirely on what could be learnt from educational models in New York. I continue to suspect that our outlook is limited by language capability.

(4) DISCLAIMER 2:

The second disclaimer I would like to offer is that the struggle for improved English literacy and the need for second language acquisition should not be an 'either/or' argument. The

two are not mutually exclusive, and should be made to co-exist and 'mutually inform' in our national curriculum.

As we extol the virtues of multilingualism in Australia, we must also remind ourselves of the necessity of English as our shared official language and a major multinational tongue. As David Crystal reports in his book, *English as a Global Language*, there are now over seventy countries in which English is either the major language, or the official tongue of major institutions, or the primary second language alongside the official lingua franca.⁵ The labour market has internationalised, and we cannot undervalue the strategic importance of being fluent in a language of such global cultural and economic reach.

So while second language acquisition should be prioritised in our schools and workplaces, we must simultaneously ensure that all Australian citizens are given the opportunity to become fluent in our national language.

Without this basic right and imperative we will have many citizens who can be neither national nor international citizens, when they should be given every opportunity to be both.

(5) WHY MULTILINGUALISM IS IMPORTANT FOR A 'GLOBAL AUSTRALIA'

In 1974, **Al Grassby**, the then Federal Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, and the creator of one of Australia's first bilingual radio programs, painted a vision of the post-modern Australian. He imagined a citizenry that was global in outlook and that was cognisant of Australia's place in the world, and in particular, the Asia-Pacific region. These Australians would speak more than one language, have access to the richness of the world's offerings, and have a strong sense of self and the identity of their nation.⁶

Inherent in Grassby's vision is the importance of second language acquisition in this country, some of which I will exemplify.

Diplomacy

When Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered himself as a zhengyou, or 'straight-talking' friend, to President Hu Jintao in fluent Mandarin, a significant message was sent. Personal accounts of this exchange indicate

the impact of Rudd's linguistic aptitude. To speak in the native tongue of your economic and cultural 'neighbours' is a powerful symbol, and should not be taken lightly. At a personal level, I recall all too well how Danes fall over themselves to congratulate individuals who have learned to master Danish, while dismissing those who fail to do so.

In his address to the Australian Principals Association in 2002, General Peter Cosgrove, former head of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), recounted that a crucial inadequacy in Australia's peace-keeping and nation-building capabilities in East Timor in the late 1990s was the lack of language skills at every level. General Cosgrove stated that the ADF simply required more trained linguists to negotiate with Australia's Coalition partners, which comprised twenty nations that between them spoke seven different languages. Without sufficient language training, there were more misunderstandings based on cultural differences than anyone could have expected.

Personal expression

The argument for language acquisition, I would suggest, should not be limited to the worlds of trade, defence, and homeland security.

Language is more than a commodity to be transacted at a diplomatic level: it is also an important vector to human understanding. A shared language is a symbol of commonality and relatedness; it is a means of identifying, respecting and expressing empathy with

(below)

Australian peace-keeping and nation-building capabilities rely on communication skills between different cultures. **Australian Peacekeeper speaking with local youths in East Timor.**

COURTESY OF UN PEACEKEEPING FORCES IN EAST TIMOR.



(below)

Malaysian performers at an alumni event of the University of South Australia in Kuala Lumpur, 2009.

AUTHOR'S OWN PHOTOGRAPH.





other personal or cultural standpoints. Importantly, multilingualism enables us to communicate in more than one cultural paradigm, to express multiple identities and to think in ways other than those set by the structure of our first language. It allows us to build bridges of knowledge that otherwise would not exist, and to form bonds with

others from different ethnic contexts. In this way, our worldview is broadened, and our cultural capital is enriched.

(above)

Australian multilingualism at play.

IMAGE COURTESY OF FOOTBALL FEDERATION AUSTRALIA.

International innovation

Perhaps a less obvious but important argument for language competence is the volume of research and technological intelligence published in the major languages of trade and innovation, such as Japanese, Chinese, Korean, German and French. Notwithstanding modern translation technology, knowledge of the local language still appears to be necessary to tap into global knowledge systems.

Some may argue that with most academic publications being written in English, it is the non-English speaking countries that are at a disadvantage, not necessarily having the native English proficiency needed to understand the relevant research literature. There may also be a belief that the best research will always be published in English, so knowledge of other languages is not essential.

However, both statements are misleading.

There are academic disciplines in which significant amounts of research are published in languages other than English. For example, much wine research is published in French, Italian and Spanish, and much of the twentieth-century critical theory was published in French and German, as exemplified by Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous,

Martin Heidegger and Jürgen Habermas. This means that the total pool of knowledge in, for example, wine research and critical theory research is practically only available to speakers of more than one language.⁷

Cultural access

I recall being invited to a meeting in Berlin during the nineties, when I was a member of the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation's International Trade Committee and Australia was having difficulty entering the European wine market. Dr Reiner Wittkowski, Chair of the German Committee for the technical regulation of winemaking in Germany, was eager to bridge the gap between European and Australian positions in these decade-long international negotiations. Given my skills in German, Dr Wittkowski asked me to attend a meeting of his all-German steering committee, in the hope of advancing consensus. The meeting was of course conducted in German. As such, my attendance was perceived by some to have been a risky move. However, I believe it paid off: I could not have gained certain key insights and strengthened mutual respect had I not been multilingual. I certainly would not have had an opportunity to express my views at such a crucial forum without being able to speak the language of my international peers. For me this is an enduring example of the bridges that can be built and the cultural access that can be gained from language competence, and the ability to communicate with your chosen audience.

(6) THE ARGUMENT AGAINST MULTILINGUALISM

Of course some will argue that multilingualism is not necessary for Australia or indeed the world. Translation technologies are advancing rapidly and may one day be able to translate quicker and more accurately than second languages learners. The concept of a Babel fish, or portable language interpreter, is artfully conjured by Douglas Adams in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. A number of modern-day technologies have evolved along these lines, most notably the online translation site likewise named 'Babel Fish' (a direct reference to Adams's vision). We have also seen the development

of speech recognition software and hand-held translators such as the 'Speechalator'.⁸

Can such technologies replace free-flowing conversation, or the power, creativity or intimacy of one-on-one dialogue? In my view: No. My hypothesis is that multilingualism will continue to play an irrefutable and irreplaceable part in our social, cultural and economic prosperity.

(7) MYTHS ABOUT LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

With this in mind, I recognise the challenge confronted by policy-makers and teachers when attempting to prioritise English alongside other languages in the school curriculum. It is a complex issue that demands ambitious outcomes, and I certainly do not claim to hold the answers to this dilemma.

But I would like to point to the local and international literature that shows that the literacy skills gained in one language can be transferred to a second language, even if their alphabets are different.⁹

There is further evidence to suggest that second-language acquisition at an early age can actually *improve* English skills. As such, we

boundaries and act as important cultural brokers between their cultures and that of Anglo-Australia. They are in a powerful position to contribute as interlocutors, policy-makers and cultural mediators of Australia's future.

This is exemplified by South Australia's Lieutenant Governor Hieu Van Le. One of the first Vietnamese people to arrive in Australia by boat in 1977, Lieutenant Governor Van Le has since gone on to win the Centenary of Federation Medal for the advancement of multiculturalism, and become the first Asian to chair the South Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission. He is a tireless advocate for increased educational linkages between Australia and Vietnam, and assists South Australian universities in their efforts to engage with relevant educational stakeholders in Vietnam.

While we can and should derive benefit from the language skills introduced to this country through consecutive waves of immigration, this alone is in my view not a viable foundation for a single, overarching language strategy.

We need a sustainable and enduring language infrastructure that is not subject

MANY BILINGUAL AUSTRALIANS HAVE THE GIFT OF BEING ABLE TO TRANSCEND CULTURAL BOUNDARIES AND ACT AS IMPORTANT CULTURAL BROKERS.

have a responsibility to challenge the crowded curriculum argument and find ways to ensure that second-language learning and teaching is not inadvertently marginalised in order to focus on English literacy alone.¹⁰

(8) BILINGUAL AUSTRALIANS AS CULTURAL VECTORS: MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

According to 2006 Census data, over three million Australian adults speak a community language at home. The 'big six' are Mandarin, Italian, Arabic, Greek, Cantonese and Vietnamese, and we are seeing increases in the use of Hindi, Korean and Filipino.¹¹

Many would therefore argue that Australia has a hidden resource in its bi/multilingual population, who have important language skills that may be under-utilised in our schools and workplaces. Many bilingual Australians have the gift of being able to transcend cultural

to changes in immigration patterns and, potentially, policy. We can't teach every language to the same high standard but we can make some strategic choices about the language curriculum, and focus on achieving genuine fluency in a tactical range of languages. Of course there will be many tensions associated with this choice, and I recognise these as significant practical and policy challenges, especially given that only about thirteen percent of year twelve students in Australia are now studying a second language at school.¹² It will be a challenge for scholars and decision makers to engage in this debate in a way that probably needs to recognise the imperative of tough calls.

Notwithstanding the magnitude of such challenges, Australia should be significantly assisted in this quest by the many languages that are already spoken here in large numbers. These languages form a defining part of

Australia's cultural mix, and almost certainly have strong power as inter-cultural currency in Asia and Europe.

(9) A WAY FORWARD (1): TEACHING LANGUAGES COOPERATIVELY

One way that Australia may be able to better utilise its language resources and achieve greater language competence is through further enhancement of existing cooperative approaches operated at a national level. Through such approaches the language expertise of our educational institutions is pooled and shared. This would alleviate the pressure for schools and universities to develop expertise across a broad range of languages, and instead allow them to specialise. I believe that humanities scholars can and should play

up the agendas. It does not matter who is in government, there are certain groupings that always will get a strong hearing and it is rarely a bunch of Vice-Chancellors!

Serious engagement with groupings that are so different from, for example, the Australian Academy of the Humanities, requires the development of another form of 'multilingualism' akin to the example I gave earlier about touring the Riverland.

Multilingualism, and ability to change in order to communicate with one's audience, always starts at home. I implore the humanities to further expand language beyond their own disciplinary tongue in order to effectively communicate to those outside their sphere, who are crucial to the implementation of humanities research. Not to be able to speak in non-scholarly contexts quarantines

I IMPLOR THE HUMANITIES TO FURTHER EXPAND LANGUAGE BEYOND THEIR OWN DISCIPLINARY TONGUE IN ORDER TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE TO THOSE OUTSIDE THEIR SPHERE.

a strong role in working collaboratively to implement practical measures to achieve those aims, with a greater emphasis on the national good, even in the face of pressures to put institutional interests at the fore.

(10) A WAY FORWARD (2): THE ROLE OF THE HUMANITIES IN IMPROVED LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND THE NEED FOR PARTNERSHIPS

Humanities scholars have a significant opportunity to play a larger and more influential role in the language competence of our country, and to dramatically turn around our relative monolingual condition. However, to get significant traction in this area and to substantially influence policy makers, I also believe they must engage with other stakeholder groups including the business community through peak bodies such as the Building Council of Australia, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Australian Industry Group. We have recently seen how the BCA in particular has engaged in the educational and school debate — do not ignore this opportunity — take advantage of the interest from the big end of town and link

knowledge, and leads to a form of disciplinary monolingualism to which I will refer in more detail later. I hasten to say that this of course is not a 'curse' unique to humanities scholars; nevertheless, my experience at the ARC clearly indicates that failure to address this issue can put the humanities more at risk than most other disciplines.

(11) INHIBITORS TO LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

The Australian school curriculum

As a nation we have traditionally been resistant to the idea of enforcing second-language learning as a long-term, compulsory component of our educational curriculum. Second languages are frequently deemed to be supplementary to the program, and not a vital part of our children's development as global citizens in a multilingual world. Though most people do not question mathematics, science and history as core subjects, we have not always prioritised, or taken seriously enough, the importance of second language acquisition. Although I do note Deputy Prime Minister Gillard's media release of today on the issue of Asian languages and the 2020 target to double

the number of year twelve students with fluency in Chinese, Indian, Japanese or Korean.¹³

Though the idea of ‘mandating’ anything often inspires ill-feeling, I propose that until languages are made compulsory in the school curriculum from reception to high school, we will never achieve the kind of language competence necessary to allow us to interact most effectively at an international level, or achieve the deep cultural understanding required to gain access to the motivations and agendas of our neighbours and trading partners. The challenge for scholars and policy makers, I suspect, will be to make hard choices: will the scholars be able to do so — even if their ‘home’ discipline misses out? Will scholars be able to link up with powerful partners such as the BCA? I believe they must!

(12) DISCIPLINARY MONOLINGUALISM

Monolingualism does not only relate to the languages we speak in daily life, but also to the languages we speak in our academic and professional worlds. As mentioned earlier, disciplinary monolingualism, or the encoded and often impenetrable tongue of our academic towers, can be every bit as debilitating as traditional monolingualism, although in different contexts.

Much important research occurring both in the humanities and sciences is not being effectively communicated to the public or to other disciplinary areas, limiting essential cross-fertilisation of ideas and the implementation of crucial environmental, social and technological solutions to the challenges facing today’s society.

The creation of knowledge citadels, or ‘islands’ of research that do not transcend their disciplinary walls, places grave limitations on us economically and culturally.

When research discoveries do not transcend their discipline, innovation is held hostage. We end up living in a world of discovery, and not of linkage. This is a position we as a nation can ill afford.

It is interesting to note that a content analysis undertaken of the submissions to the Cutler Review of our National Innovation System is said to highlight a significant degree of disciplinary monolingualism. The analysis

indicates that not only did different groups, such as government, business, research organisations and individuals, have somewhat different concerns, but that they used different language to discuss their most pressing concerns. Professor Dodgson reported that this showed an ‘absence of a shared language to build common understanding, and [that this in turn] may reveal some worrying disconnections’.¹⁴

Examples of successful multidisciplinary collaborations

There are of course many examples of where a multidisciplinary approach to technical problems has led to groundbreaking invention. Look at the Apple iPod, which was developed in under a year by a multidisciplinary team of hardware engineers, software developers, industrial designers, manufacturers and marketing specialists. The importance of the iPod story lies in the fact that Apple looked *outside* of its own headquarters and ‘information silo’ to source innovation from independent inventors and small businesses.

If we look at the iPod design process, we see that Apple moved across sectors to source as many outside ideas and new technologies as possible, and then blended this with their own knowledge and vision. As reported in *Wired* magazine, the technology for the iPod hard drive was sourced from Toshiba; the iPod battery came from Sony; the music library program that runs iTunes was sourced from a local software developer; the iPod’s operating system came from an independent company called Pixo; the scroll wheel was suggested by Apple’s Head of Marketing; the iPod interface was mocked up by an in-house interactive designer; and the iPod name was offered up by a freelance copywriter who had joined Apple on a temporary basis.

The Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences has drawn attention to the issue of disciplinary monolingualism in its report entitled *Collaborating across the Sectors*.¹⁵ The report points to the social, economic and environmental risks of impeding cross-sectoral activities. The report also highlights some of the innovations that were emerging as the result of multidisciplinary collaboration.

Causes of disciplinary monolingualism

While I recognise the imperative to retain deep disciplinary expertise in our teaching and research establishments, disciplinary monolingualism is in my view a threat to Australia's social, cultural, environmental and economic prosperity. As such, we need to establish channels for engagement between the disciplines, as well as attractive opportunities for the humanities, arts and social sciences to understand and collaborate with researchers in science, technology, engineering and medicine and *vice versa*. It is often only through such collaboration that the big issues can be addressed. And these collaborations are mediated through 'languages' and 'open minds'. By the way, I would not be surprised if such cross-disciplinary openness could be facilitated by engaging in learning languages other than your mother tongue!

The need for corrective actions to enhance the importance and impact of humanities research outside the discipline

Humanities researchers, like researchers in other fields, strive to be recognised for their excellence by global peers and a very dominant gold standard is the publication of the sole-authored book. I hazard a guess that this worthwhile activity, on average, is conducted with less evidence of international collaboration than commonly witnessed for the science-based disciplines. While the merits of this approach to discovery and to demonstrating individual excellence are widely accepted, it necessitates some corrective action to ensure that the ability to work in multidisciplinary teams is not compromised. From a purely selfish view this skill must be maintained in order to secure funding for research at a time where significant funding appears directed towards international teams of multidisciplinary capacity. Much more importantly though — vigilance is required because participation in such activities across discipline language barriers will demonstrate the broader potential and value of humanities research. Failure to do so will in my view put not only the humanities at a disadvantage, but indeed society.

As mentioned earlier, I had the great privilege of leading the Australian Research Council for almost three years from 2004 to

2007. It is now on public record that Minister Nelson elected to decline funding a number of grants the ARC had recommended for funding. Many researchers were quite understandably disturbed by the Minister's exercising his prerogative to do this. Despite this widespread concern, I was very pleased to see that senior humanities scholars took a responsible course of action that not only led to discontinuation of the practice but also gained them widespread respect. Could all this have been avoided? It is my view that it could, if the languages and modes of expression from the parties involved had been mutually cognisant of the different contexts at play — in my view another example of the diminished outcomes that result from inability to communicate in different modes and with full contextual awareness.

(13) CONCLUSION

It is my hypothesis and near conviction that Australia cannot afford the risk of monolingualism on any level despite our having English as our mother tongue.

My argument is not for one cultural dialect over another, but rather for an enhanced ability to communicate across boundaries. We cannot grow as individuals or as a nation if we are confined to a single cultural context. Without the capacity to understand cultural and disciplinary filters, we lose access to each other and to worlds of understanding and innovation in the broadest sense. This is important not only for our economic and political advancement, but also for our quality of life and the improvement of the human condition.

I have argued for advanced language competence at a national level, a *sine qua non* to further Australia's interests across geo-cultural borders and in order to contribute to global solutions. Without a national language capacity, we endanger our ability to gain deep access to the decision-makers who will have influence over the future of our position in the world. Australia has a rich language pool from which to draw, and this should not be overlooked: however, there is significant scope for a more tactical and consolidated approach to language strategy. This should be underpinned by a recognition that while English fluency is an imperative, having English skills alone will prove

a disadvantage for our citizens moving forward. I have argued that humanities scholars must make tough decisions and form alliances with unlikely partners in order to move on this front. In my view it is a risk not to do so.

I have also argued for 'multilingualism' at a broader, disciplinary level. Given the complexity of the social, environmental and technological challenges we face in the twenty-first century, there has never been a more urgent need for cross-disciplinary collaboration and the ability to communicate ideas, methods and invention between different disciplinary hubs. Our biggest issues in, for example, security, environmental sustainability, water management, indigenous education and aged care cannot be successfully addressed with a mono-disciplinary approach ignorant of the global context. Channels of engagement must be forged and barriers created by funding, discipline esteem and evaluation procedures need to be overcome. I have travelled a long way in the past few years in my discovery of disciplines other than my own. My greatest discovery has been the power of disciplinary crosstalk and the pivotal importance of the humanities in such talks. While it is important to continue to advance deep disciplinary knowledge, there are times when it is right to fill gaps in capabilities that are required to address societal opportunities rather than filling gaps in the literature! 🍷



PETER HØJ FTSE is Vice Chancellor and President of the University of South Australia and was Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Research Council from 2004 to 2007. He has a PhD in plant biochemistry and an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Copenhagen.

Acknowledgements: I am indebted to Jane Clayton for her tireless effort to convert my ideas to a draft script and to keep smiling while many iterations were pursued. Similarly, I really appreciate the inputs from Mr David Cox, Professor Pal Ahluwalia, Professor Caroline McMillen, Dr Penny Moore, Associate Professor Angela Scarino and Professor Mandy Thomas. While many ideas are theirs, all errors would undoubtedly be associated with the author, who has done his utmost to acknowledge originators of ideas in a field that is a fair distance from his expertise but nevertheless close to his heart.

* * *

1. This paper was presented by the author as the Academy's Triebel Lecture on 16 February 2009 at the University of Melbourne.
2. David Graddol, *English Next* (London: British Council, 2006).
3. These ideas have been paraphrased from Michael Clyne, *The Time Has Come to Go Forward Together*. Speech delivered at the Canberra Region Languages Forum (7 October 2007).
4. This quote comes from Joseph Lo Bianco, 'Tapping the Reservoir: Languages at School', *Online Opinion* (2008), <www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=7329&page=0> [accessed 30 January 2009].
5. David Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
6. Al Grassby's vision has been paraphrased from an extract in Michael Clyne, *Australia's Unrecognized Resources Boom – Languages for Australia's Future*, Inaugural Language and Society Centre Lecture (Monash University, Melbourne: August 2008).
7. Even though a lot of works are translated into English, it is argued that there is no substitution for reading texts in the original language as exemplified by the scholars who have gone to the trouble of learning Danish to access Søren Kierkegaard's original texts.
8. This material has been summarised from Jim Giles, 'You Speak, It Translates', *New Scientist* (24 January 2009), p. 49.
9. This information has been obtained from Michael Clyne, 'Blueprint for a Monolingual and Parochial Australia?', *Languages Education in Australia* (2007), <www.languageseducation.com/clyneo70809.pdf> [accessed 30 January 2009].
10. Michael Clyne, 'Diverse Language Skills Will Open the World to Australians', *The Age*, 1 January 2008, <www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/diverse-language-skills-will-open-the-world-to-australians/2008/01/01/1198949813556.html> [accessed 30 January 2009].
11. Commonwealth of Australia, 'Languages Spoken at Home by Sex', in *2006 Census of Population and Housing* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, cat. No. 2068.0, 2006).
12. This figure is widely cited across language commentary, including Michael Clyne, *Australia's Unrecognized Resources Boom*; and Joseph Lo Bianco, 'Tapping the Reservoir: Languages at School'.
13. Julia Gillard, *More Support for Students to Learn Asian Languages*, Media Release, 15 February 2009.
14. M. Dodgson, *Content Analysis of Submissions by Leximancer* (The Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, 2008), <www.innovation.gov.au/innovationreview/Pages/home.aspx> [accessed 5 February 2009].
15. Jenni Metcalf, Michelle Riedlinger, Anne Pisarski and John Gardner, 'Collaborating across the Sectors', *CHASS Occasional Paper 3* (Canberra: Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, 2006).