

Universalism and Indigeneity

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Abstract: This paper gives brief consideration to the relationship between the indigenous and the universal in a series of texts. It may seem surprising that the indigenous in this phrasing is opposed to the universal. The governing assumption here is that imperial powers are the bearers of a kind of universality. While the imperial power in one aspect embodies a particular interest, and can be construed then as no more than the assertion of one particular interest over another, in another aspect imperialism creates a quasi-universality, in its tendency to overcome cultural difference, and in doing so creates the ground for the emergence of universalism as such. To conceive of the imperial or dominant state in this way has a Hegelian cast, while the use of the term 'universalism' coincides with the thinking of Alain Badiou. In the light of this general framework, this paper considers aspects of the role of indigenous languages in dominant-language texts, viewing the dominant language as quasi-universal, and examining the particularising role of indigeneity as the dialectical product of the universalising process of domination, specifically in order to ask whether the indigenous, rather than resisting the dominant universal, aspires to it, belongs to it, even authenticates it.

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In the context of the Augustan Roman Empire, Aramaic must be considered an indigenous language. The show-through of Aramaic into Greek in the books of the New Testament, its subsequent presentation in the Latinized Bible and thence into most or all world languages, is one of the most notable examples of the interface between a colonial and indigenous language. I'll bypass the discussion about whether the whole of NT Greek is inflected by Aramaic (the leading scholar making this claim is C. F. Burney; I should state that I am in no way qualified to assess this claim). More simply I will mention those Aramaic words which are carried through, transliterated in Greek characters, and have subsequently passed into many languages: 'amen', 'alleluia', 'Armageddon', 'Satan' are examples of these single Aramaic words which occur in NT and have passed into wide usage.

Some examples of the invocation of Aramaic create textual effects which begin to show the range of means available at the indigenous/dominant interface. Here are three.

(i) While the word 'rabbi' appears several times in NT, John 20:16 thematizes its use. The risen Jesus approaches Mary Magdalene, who does not recognise him mainly we suppose because she can have no

conception that he has been resurrected.

Jesus said to her, 'Mary.'

She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means 'Teacher')

This is a recognition moment in which all of Mary's thought and emotion are focalised in this one word. It is as if here only the actual utterance can report the general affect, in a trope which (1) authenticates the truth of the Gospel's report [saying, in effect, this *is* the actual word spoken, before any translation or other mediation; no other will do] and (2) suggests an overwhelming process of truth-recognition in Mary at this stage which to which the word she utters testifies, but which it does not convey.

(ii) Perhaps the best-known example is the reported words of the dying Christ, Matthew 27:45.

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, '*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')

Here again the effect is to suggest the pressure of authenticity. Again the text presents the words in Aramaic and in Greek translation, implicitly suggesting that where elsewhere the Greek will serve whether or not the words reported were originally uttered in Aramaic, here the actual sound of the utterance, and the actual vocabulary must be witnessed, because only these words open on the relationship to which they testify. In each example here, the recognition of authority is central, not only in terms of the persons whose words are reported, but in terms of the status of the Gospels as authoritative texts which seem truly to open on the reality which they witness.

(iii) Acts 22:37-23:3 narrates how Paul, arrested by the Romans following his arrival in Jerusalem as he escapes a hostile Jewish crowd, asks the Romans for permission to speak to his persecutors. Paul asks the commander, presumably in Greek but conceivably in Latin 'May I speak to you?' to which the commander replies 'Do you speak Greek?' conveying the detail that Greek is not universally spoken by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. We are told that Paul speaks to the Jewish crowd in Aramaic, although his words are reported in Greek:

'Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defence.'

When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.

Paul's appeal to the crowd fails (they demand his death), but this moment of recognition (the crowd acknowledge him as one of their own) is of more significance as a dramatisation of the relationship between indigenous and dominant language, as well as between the bearers of those languages, then of any moment of authenticity, recognition, or truth-telling (Paul's appeal for recognition fails).

While these three examples are described mainly in terms of 'literary-critical' effects – perhaps out of my own lack of desire or ability to press a

greater weight of cultural-theoretical analysis on the pre-modern world than it will bear – one fact needs mentioning. The mocking notice placed over the head of Christ on the Cross ('Jesus of Nazareth. King of the Jews') is said to have been written in 'Aramaic, Latin and Greek' (John 19:19). This reminds us that while Greek is the dominant, administrative language of the area, it is not the language of the Roman rulers (whose Latin names, where given in NT, strongly imply that they are Latin speakers). Why Greek is the administrative language of the Eastern Roman Empire at this early stage I have so far been unable to discover (I am not a Biblical or classical scholar, and have mailed a number of people who ought to know so far to no effect.) My working assumption is that it is an Alexandrian residue, but the time-scale seems long. For our purposes here though this leads to the observation that **the dominant language is not necessarily the indigenous language of the rulers.** What follows from this is the observation that NT texts, which were circulated originally in Greek, and which we have seen here in terms of those moments when they testify to the indigenous language of many of the subjects whose existence they narrate, should probably be understood as adopting Greek because Greek is the dominant language. Once we remind ourselves that Aramaic, which I have treated as an 'indigenous' language, was in fact spoken widely since it had been the administrative language of the Persian Empire from the 6th Century B.C. This suggests that **any language defined as 'indigenous' can only be contingently so-defined for certain purposes local to our own operations.** In the NT context we have found ourselves dealing with layers of imperial history. NT use of 'indigenous' Aramaic has been seen to be authenticating, certainly, but not in the sense that it testifies to the reality of some underlying indigenous culture; rather it purports to testify to the reality of events. Here we converge with the analysis of Pauline Christianity as the 'foundation of universalism' in the modern world, in the philosophy of Alain Badiou. In the earliest period of Christianity, Paul fought and won an argument against those who sought to limit belief in Christ to ethnic Jews. Issues regarding 'indigeneity' in the context of the Diaspora and of diasporas in general would require yet another framework. Here the point is that the adherence to the truth (adopting Badiou's framework without further ado) in Pauline Christianity is available to any subject regardless of history, and that the truth (on this account) is (as) universal in character (as mathematics are held to be). In most accounts, it is recognised that the spread of Christianity – its move towards quasi-universal practice – was made possible by the communication mechanisms of the Roman Empire. Since our focus here is language we can make several observations which for the sake of brevity are presented here without further support:

- (1) Ethnicity, indigeneity and even the category of 'native-speaker' should be routinely disaggregated;

- (2) The category of 'administrative language' should be introduced to discussions of indigeneity and dominance to clarify certain historical processes of language adoption;
- (3) All language has a (principal) administrative function;
- (4) This administrative function is in part communicative in character, and while one form of language use might tend to in-group communication, the other use is universalising and supposes the aim of extra-group communication.

These points begin to unpack just some of the perspectives that examining questions of language interface in longer perspectives begins to open. Briefly, and in order to show what a more sustained exposition might begin to suggest, I will in condensed fashion set out a number of claims which begin to suggest how our own modern, romantic-historicist perspective influences not merely 'our' view of the indigenous in language but our production of it:

- (1) English is an (entirely hybrid) indigenous language. There has never been a monarch on the English throne of English descent (see Norman Davies, *The Isles*). The language of the Norman ruling class is called Anglo-Norman, and this was replaced as court language by an early-modern English still in the process of formation only toward the end of the 14th Century, mainly for dynastic-strategic reasons. This reminds us that an 'indigenous' language (here one which is unusually hybrid) can be adopted upwards as a 'dominant' language.
- (2) The 18th Century as the period of language codification driven by the thinking of the European Enlightenment and its adopters begins to locate indigenous language as the 'lost' residue of progressive, modernising forces which is to be recuperated and reconstituted for historical purposes, though not reactivated except for limited, aesthetic ends. The 'author of *Waverley*' with his linguistic-historical meticulousness, bracketing mockery of such meticulousness, unremitting commitment to modernisation processes, and refusal to concede anything more than a (self-conscious and carefully-managed) romantic glamour to the indigenous and overcome, stands at the apex of the optic in which this process can be viewed (not just in England and Scotland of course but throughout the Europeanised world; here there are questions about early translations of *Waverley* which I am not in a position to document. In America, Cooper's mapping of the romantically 'last' indigenous 'Mohicans' partakes in this optic).
- (3) If Scott actualises a key moment in the confrontation of indigenous language with modernising processes, John Jamieson's four volume *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (2 vols 1808, further 2 vols 1825), created a geographically and temporally conflated conspectus of Lowland Scots not available to any individual Scots-speaker ever extant.

It was the single-volume version of this *Dictionary* (1848) which the Scots Communist and Nationalist writer, Christopher Murray Grieve, publishing as Hugh MacDiarmid used to create an invented, synthetic literary Scots in such works as 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle' (1926). MacDiarmid's purpose was both nationalist and romantic/symbolist. Here the intention is not simply historical-documentary as in Scott but – surprisingly – an analogue of Mallarméan Platonism in which absolute ideation is to be achieved through rigorous pursuit of the word as symbol. This moment in MacDiarmid characterises the romantic return of indigenous language via its administrative assimilation (Jamieson) and in the characteristic form of romantic irony in which the creator is no longer identified as the expressive subject of literary utterance but as the aloof fabricator of the artwork – the absolute mind. I'll say in passing that I consider MacDiarmid to be incredibly neglected by scholars of British modernism, and I hope that the recent emergence of Scottish governmental autonomy as a topic in U.S. political discourse might lead other modernist scholars back to MacDiarmid as a founder of the National Party of Scotland (forerunner of the Scottish National Party which was responsible for freeing Abdelbaset Al Megrahi).

- (4) The use of English as the language of Empire ambiguated its status as an indigenous language. Yet English is the indigenous language of most English people, whatever else it may be, and it is in Lawrence that we find some attempt to acknowledge this. Lawrence characterised the war-mongering administrative organisation of Britain as a structure of 'bullying.' He attempted to get out from under this bullying by a variety of strategies, which in his writing involved first a defence 'England' in terms of indigenous cultural inflections which are rarely represented elsewhere, in his life involving setting himself at the frontier between the English of Empire and indigenous existence beyond his linguistic reach (resulting notably in *The Plumed Serpent*), and perhaps most famously in his deployment of indigenous English dialect as the defence of Mellors in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as a refuge from encroaching modernisation, an anti-universalising strategy of hibernation. This indigenous Lawrence is still somewhat neglected, for reasons which may be evident.

Finally I'll mention merely briefly that debates in Native American Literary Theory (here I'll cite Weaver, Womack, Warrior, *American Indian Literary Nationalism*) organised around questions of defeat, 'survivance', ethnicity, and language-loss against a background of conquest and assimilation begin to achieve their full range of potential meaning only in the longer perspectives which I have begun to set out here.

