



The curated artifact: the case of languages

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Received: 16 July 2024 / Accepted: 10 February 2025
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Abstract

I defend the view that natural languages are artifacts, made and kept in existence by large groups of people through a process of what I call “curatorial creation.” Drawing on a theory of artifacts as the impositions of mind onto matter, a theory I have developed elsewhere, and making use of the examples of explicitly artifactual languages such as Esperanto and Volapük, I attempt to draw out, and render plausible, the idea that even natural languages can be seen as artifacts.

Keywords Abstract artifacts · Collective action · Creation · Esperanto · Questione della lingua · Volapük

In this paper, I defend the view that natural languages are artifacts. Languages are, I believe, best viewed as abstract particulars but it is not their abstractness that makes them interesting as examples of artifacts. It is by now a fairly common thought that abstract objects can be artifacts.¹ What makes languages interesting as artifacts is rather the method by which they are brought into, and maintained in, existence. This method is collective, relatively uncoordinated, and operative through the entire time of their existence. I call this method of artifactual creation “curatorial creation.” Languages are not the only artifacts that have their origins in curatorial creation so an examination of them will also help to shed light on a number of other entities, for example nations. I shall not, however, follow up that suggestion here.

¹ Levinson (1980) was an early influential voice. Thomasson (1998) brought the idea into the mainstream. There is now a large literature on the topic. See, for example, Evnine (2016) and Friedell (2021).

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1 The objects of investigation

I am focused here on languages, not language. I don't know what the ontological status of language as such is, but I very much doubt it would make sense to say that it is an artifact (or that it is not). Languages, by contrast, I take as particular, though abstract, objects. They are the things which are referred to by such terms as "English," "Italian," "Hindi," and thousands more. This may seem too obvious to need stating but it is not. Chomsky distinguishes what he calls I-languages from E-languages. E-languages are externalized languages, characterized by Chomsky as something like sets of sentences and specified without any reference to the minds or psychologies of their speakers. I-languages, by contrast, are internal processes in the minds of speakers and hearers that allow them to produce and understand each others' utterances. E-languages, Chomsky thinks, correspond to a folk conception of what a language is and are, or are close to, what people refer to with terms like "English" and "Italian."² I-languages are legitimate objects of scientific study. Chomsky comes close to denying the existence of E-languages but clearly, if falling short of outright denial, denigrates them. They are, he says, "*mere artifacts*" (Chomsky, 1986, 26; my emphasis). He does not mean by that they are artifacts in the sense at issue in this paper but rather that they are the results of processes of abstraction. This unfits them as legitimate objects of study for linguistics.

I remain agnostic here about Chomsky's claims about the role of E-languages in linguistics. But I note that from their failure to be of interest to linguistics it does not follow that they fail to be of interest to other areas of study. The referents of terms like "English" and "Italian" are primarily of interest to me as cultural objects. As such, they are of great, often urgent, interest to their speakers and objects of study in cultural studies, history, and anthropology. It is these cultural objects that this paper is about.³

Another well-known source of skepticism about the existence of my objects of study is Donald Davidson's assertion that "there is no such thing as language, not if a language is anything like what philosophers, at least, have supposed" (Davidson, 1986, 446). I shall discuss Davidson's views further below. Suffice it to say here that my starting point is that there do exist such things as English, Italian, and the rest. My goal here is to explain how such things are artifacts and to sketch an account of how they are made.

²For reasons that will become clear, I do not think the referents of terms like "English" are sets of sentences but here I focus not on Chomsky's exact characterization of E-languages but on his rejection, or denigration, of them.

³Wiggins (2022) argues that Chomsky is mistaken in terms very congenial to my project here. In addition, he clearly asserts, with me, that languages are artifacts. However, he does not attempt to say anything about how they are made, which is my chief concern in this paper.

2 The basic theory of artifacts

I make the claim that languages are artifacts against the background of a more or less comprehensive account of artifacts that I have developed elsewhere (Evnine, 2016). I will not rehearse the entire account here but briefly summarize what is necessary for the discussion of languages. There are two major components in my account: matter and work. Work implies someone who works. This is the artisan or maker. The matter is what the artisan works on and the nature of the work involves the imposition of a concept of an artifactual kind onto the matter. (Imposing the concept onto the *matter* is not to be confused with predicating the concept of the resulting *artifact*.) In the case of most concrete artifacts, the concept will be imposed through the intentional manipulation of the matter to enable it to constitute an artifact of the intended type. The carpenter saws, nails, and glues the wood with the intention of making a table out of it. This is imposing the concept *table* onto the matter—the wood, glue, and nails. It is part of what it is to be a table that tables have certain (roughly defined) functions. Hence the concept *table* includes a reference to those functions and the imposition of that concept onto some matter endows the resulting object, the table, with the characteristic functions of a table. (I take the preceding two sentences to provide a gloss on Aristotle's claim, restricted to artifacts, that the formal, efficient, and final causes of a substance often coincide.)

In special and rare cases, cases in which nature smiles on us, the matter of a concrete artifact will require no manipulation, being already of the right 'shape,' and in that case, the imposition of the concept takes the form only of selection of the matter and stipulation that there is now an artifact of the relevant kind that has the matter as its matter.⁴ This is sometimes derided as creation by thought or talk alone (Zimmerman, 2002, 333–4).⁵ But owing to the nature of the material world, such cases are rare and must be understood by reference to the more usual case.

The abstract world, by contrast, is quite different. One cannot manipulate abstract matter, one can only select it and this can be done specifically in conjunction with the imposition onto the selected matter of a given artifactual concept.⁶ Consider, as an example that will be helpful in understanding how languages fit my approach, Jerrold Levinson's (1980) well-known account of the nature of musical works.⁷ A musical work, says Levinson, is an indicated sound structure. (He also refers to a performance structure but I omit further reference to this for the sake of simplicity.) The structure itself is the matter and is not something brought into existence by the composer. It is not an object of creation at all.⁸ What the composer does, to bring into existence a new

⁴ See Evnine (2013).

⁵ See Evnine (2016, 110–118) for a more detailed discussion of Zimmerman's charge.

⁶ One might note that, in compensation for the lack of the need for manipulation, selection in the case of abstract artifacts is generally incomparably more laborious. Just think of an author working to select exactly the right sequence of words from all the adjacent possible sequences to be the matter of her poem.

⁷ I have argued (2009) that Levinson's account can be seen as an instance of my own and Levinson (2015, 52) has agreed.

⁸ What is a structure here? It doesn't really matter for purposes of the view but one can think of it as something along the lines of a function from temporal distances from an arbitrary starting point to sets of aural properties.

thing, a musical work, is to indicate the sound structure through its selection (usually, in Western art music, by writing a score), thereby imposing onto that structure the concept *musical work*. The result is an *indicated structure*, something made out of the sound structure but not identical to it. A Platonist about musical works takes the sound structure itself to be the musical work but, as Levinson argues, this has some counter-intuitive consequences that his own theory avoids. The Platonist will have to say that strictly, the composer does not create the musical work but discovers it. Furthermore, a Platonist will have to say that two distinct composers, unaware of each other and perhaps in vastly different historical contexts, cannot ‘produce’ two distinct works that have, by amazing coincidence, the same sound structure. On Levinson’s view, the two composers would, strictly, bring into existence two distinct works—two distinct indicated structures—made out of the same abstract matter.

3 Languages as artifacts

Some languages are abstract artifacts in exactly the same way as a typical musical work is, on Levinson’s view. Call a “lexicon” an abstract structure of the following kind. It contains a set of ordered pairs, the first member of which is a sign-form (perhaps itself a sequence of sounds or visible marks) and the second of which is something that can serve as a meaning (an object, a set of objects, a concept, whatever your favorite account is). We can, for convenience, call these members of the pairs “words” and “meanings.” In addition, a lexicon contains a set of rules for combining words and, if desired, for inflecting them. There are, naturally, infinitely many lexicons and their existence is independent of any human activity. Just as a composer indicates a particular sound structure when she produces a score, so Ludwik Zamenhof and Johann Schleyer indicated lexicons when they sat down and made Esperanto and Volapük respectively. These artifacts, Esperanto and Volapük, are indicated lexicons, made out of, but not identical to, the lexicons that are their matter. We can describe their creator’s activity as the imposition of the concept *language* onto the matter.

I said above that on my view, artifacts acquire their functions because those functions are parts of the concepts of the artifact kind through the imposition of which onto the matter the artifact comes into existence. In fact, the story is a little bit more complicated. In my (2016, 119–129), I distinguish between what I call the kind-related functions of artifacts, those they have simply in virtue of belonging to a certain kind, for which the account at the beginning of the paragraph obtains, and idiosyncratic functions, those that they have through a special intention on the part of their maker. In the case of artificial languages, for example, both Esperanto and Volapük had the idiosyncratic function of promoting world peace and harmony. That is what their creators intended for them to do. (How well they performed, or were even able to perform, that function is another matter.) That function, of course, is not essential to the concept *language*. Most languages do not have that as their function. Other artificial languages might have other idiosyncratic functions. What functions do languages have just in virtue of being languages? It seems highly plausible that

communication and expression are such functions and I shall proceed on the assumption that they are.⁹ However, nothing substantial hangs on this assumption.

The question that is the focus of this paper is whether one can adapt the account given for artificial languages to so-called natural languages. ‘Natural’ is normally opposed to ‘artificial’ and natural languages are characterized as those that are not the result of artifice, of deliberate making, but have come into being merely through extended use and repetition. Notwithstanding, I shall argue that natural languages (henceforth ‘languages’ unless qualified) can be illuminatingly seen as artifacts too through an extension of the theory of artifacts sketched above.¹⁰ They are artifacts without being artificial.

Perhaps the chief, and most obvious, obstacles to seeing languages as artifacts are that they have no determinate maker or makers and the times at which they come to exist can hardly be given more precisely than by centuries. My proposal is that languages are brought into existence, and sustained in existence, by a process of what I call curatorial creation. Curatorial creation is a modality of collective action. Philosophers have taken a wide variety of approaches to understanding collective action. I rely here on an account offered by Christopher Kutz (2000b). For my purposes, there is no need for me to argue that this is the one and only correct account of collective action *tout court*. It seems highly plausible, on the face of it, there are many ways different people can act together (many kinds of togetherness, if you will). Kutz writes of many recent accounts of collective action that they “have generally aimed at explaining the special case of intimate, tightly reciprocal cooperative activity, such as conversing, walking together, or singing a duet.” His account, by contrast, is better suited to:

pedestrian but nonetheless genuine forms of collective action that we see in broader or more attenuated social contexts, such as voting, working in large organizations, supplying capital for risky ventures—collective acts typical of the consolidated yet simultaneously highly individualized circumstances of modernity. And in general these broader forms of collective action make implausible attribution of the high degrees of interdependence and mutual consciousness that are at the heart of extant analyses of collective action. (2000a, 2)

Curatorially creating a language may not be a characteristically modern activity but the degree of individualism involved with the contributory actions is ensured by the wide diffusion of the process over space and time. Other accounts of collective action that do not require joint intentions, including accounts of unintentional collective action, such as Sara Chant’s (2007), are also likely to be adaptable to my needs but I shall stick with Kutz’s account here.

⁹ If you immediately start worrying about private languages, secret languages, etc., note that kind-related functions can be contradicted by idiosyncratic ones. A chair that is made only for display (and hence with the intention that it not be sat on) still has, on my view, the function of being sat on simply in virtue of being a chair. See Evnine (2016, 121–125) for extensive discussion of such cases.

¹⁰ I have worked at extending the core theory in a number of other ways. See Evnine (2018) and (2022).

Kutz characterizes a collective action (of the kind he and I are interested in) as one that is “the product of individuals who orient themselves around a joint project” (Kutz, 2000b, 67). Orienting around a joint project is achieved by what Kutz calls “participatory intentions.” Participatory intentions are distinguished by their content and not by a distinct mode of intending. They are intentions to act that represent three components: 1) a collective end, an end that features in the participatory intentions of all who contribute to the collective action, 2) a distinct agential contribution to that end, peculiar to each contributing individual, and 3) a relation between the distinct action and the collective end (81). When a group of people act around a common project, that is, act towards the same collective end, then the group itself may be said to have acted, but this is, as is evident, to be understood in purely individual terms. Collectivity resides solely in the specification of a common end. There need be no joint intentions or even representations of the intentions of others, no plans, no reliance, nor any of the things that are generally appealed to in order to understand “the special case of intimate, tightly reciprocal cooperative activity.”

The curatorial creation of a language, the actions by which speakers of a language create and sustain their language in existence, is typically an intergenerational effort that is performed by people who know that there are others working to care for the same object without necessarily knowing who those others are, what exactly they are doing, or intentionally cooperating with them. Care for the common object and the general knowledge that one is part of a collaborative project are what give unity to the many individual actions involved. The existence (original and continuing) of the language is the common goal that features in the intentions of the multitude of the language’s curators. Each action undertaken can be seen as representing a contribution particular to an agent at a time and which is seen as contributing to this goal. The final stage, the attribution to the group of a single action, is one which should not occupy us overly much. Contexts in which the question is important are those that call for assignments of responsibility (to corporations, for example). The question of responsibility will have no application to a group creating and sustaining its own language. It is enough that people act, and see themselves as acting, as part of a common project.

The expression “curatorial creation” may seem almost like a contradiction in terms. Creation brings new things into existence while curation looks after things already in existence.¹¹ I will address this worry more directly below. Here I want to connect the two apparently contradictory words in the expression “curatorial creation” with two, complementary moments of which curatorial creation consists, two forms that care for the common object might take. We can think of these as moments of expansion and contraction, or innovation and containment. Each moment requires the other. Too much innovation or expansion and the cared for object will dissipate. Too much contraction or containment and it will rigidify and die. Not all people of a given group that sustains such a process of curatorial creation need be involved in it

¹¹ That said, some theorists of curation, in its narrower sense, have explicitly held that curation is creative. However, what they think is created is value attaching to the objects curated, not the objects themselves. See Ventzislavov (2014) for such a view.

and those who are involved need not be involved all the time, or always in the same way or even with regard to the same moment of the process.

Curatorial creation, I maintain, is the work of making directed at matter, and languages are the artifacts made by this work. In the case of artificial languages, such as Esperanto, it is not an idealization to think of the matter worked on as a lexicon, in the sense defined above. With natural languages, we can still treat the matter as a lexicon, but this is now something of an idealization of the process. A lexicon, recall, is not yet a language, a cultural object about which people care. Communities existing in unconnected contexts (here and in another solar system, for example) that had languages made out of the same lexicon would not be speaking the same language. The work itself is the process in which the speakers of a language ‘tend’ to their language, imposing on its ever-evolving matter the concept *language*.¹² (Ever-evolving because, and here the analogy with musical compositions breaks down, languages change over time. A language is not a simple indicated lexicon but an indicated function from times to lexicons.) Thus there exists an object over and above the lexicon, a fit object for love, pride, and other emotions. But what exactly does this work itself look like? I have spoken only abstractly about the individual actions taken by agents towards a collective goal. What are such actions?

Before we tackle this question, note that the actions of curating a language are not confined to language experts. While some such actions are likely to be undertaken only by specially qualified people, many of them are utterly mundane and widely spread through the population at large. We are all language-curators, at least potentially. Now, as to the kinds of action of which curating consists, taking the creation of abstract artifacts such as poems or musical works as our starting point, strictly speaking, the actions involved in curatorial creation should be actions of selecting among things to be the matter (for the moments of expansion) and deselecting (for the moments of contractions). Thus, introducing neologisms, cancelling tabu words, helping to render grammatical features (like the subjunctive in English) obsolete, and things like that. But because of the temporally extended and continuous work needed to maintain a language, the range of actions, both expansive and contractive, should be understood more broadly. And because the work of making a language is not done once, but is continuous throughout the language’s life, the distinction between working on the matter of the language and working on the language itself will be blurred.¹³

With regard to the moment of expansion or innovation the work includes things like deliberately misusing words, making plays on words, as well as more momentous things, such as compiling dictionaries or proposing language reforms. As for the moment of contraction or containment, we can mention, at the trivial end, correcting people’s use of the language, praising the special genius of the language, ridiculing the inferiority of other languages, and lamenting the decline of the language. For more significant such actions, think of writing books on the history or grammar of

¹² By ‘the concept *language*’ I mean the count concept that applies to such things as English and Italian. This is to be distinguished from a generic concept also expressed by the word “language.” See Sect. 1. above.

¹³ We can say of a language what Renan says of a nation—that its existence is a “daily plebiscite” (Renan 2010, 53).

the language and, the apogee of the containing moment, care that is so oppressive as almost to stifle the object it seeks to sustain, the creation of national language academies such as the *Accademia della Crusca*, the *Académie Française*, and the *Real Academia Española*!¹⁴ (English, thank God, lacks such a monster, clearly indicating its superiority as a language!)

Examples of the kinds of action I have just canvassed are so common as almost to be redundant here. (As indeed one should expect, since this is a virtually ceaseless and universal labor, conducted mostly, to use Foucault's phrase, in the "anonymity of a murmur" (Foucault, 1984, 119).) Furthermore, not all actions that fall under the descriptions "introducing a new word," "correcting someone's usage," and so on will count as acts of creative curation since they may lack the elements essential to participatory intentions of having a shared goal and a conception of how one's action relates to that goal. Just so a lone gallery guard might adjust a mis-hung picture without curating the exhibition it is part of though a curator, with the appropriate intentions, might be curating with the same action. I make no claim about what proportion of such actions are undertaken with participatory intentions aimed at the existence of the language but, with a generous understanding of the representation of that end, I believe it to be large.¹⁵

For an extended and systematic example of curatorial creation, consider the so-called *questione della lingua*, the business about the language, that occupied many hundreds of years of Italian history.¹⁶ Starting in the sixteenth century with Cardinal Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), with periods of great activity in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, there has been a continuing public debate about the correct form(s) of written and spoken Italian. As late as the second half of the nineteenth century it appeared there was still no consensus as to the nature, or even the existence, of something called "Italian." "At the time of the unification [1861], it is doubtful that there were any who could be described as 'native speakers' of Italian... and it is certain that, in the late nineteenth century, only a very small minority of Italians knew their national language" (Maiden, 1995, 229). The primacy of the

¹⁴ Astute readers will notice that I place compiling dictionaries with the expansive actions and writing grammars with the contractive ones. Is this distinction warranted? On the one hand, these placements do seem somewhat arbitrary. Surely both dictionaries and grammars have both expansive and contractive uses. On the other hand, there does seem to be something more 'creative' or 'enabling' about dictionaries than about grammars. I will not try to make this more reasonable or precise. It doesn't really matter how they are classified for my purposes. And perhaps expansion and contraction will not always be distinguishable from each other. Replacing, after all, involves both.

¹⁵ Very late in the work on this paper I read Kukla (2021). Kukla's ideas about the way people make ecological urban niches (and vice versa) are extremely congenial to what I say here about work on languages by their speakers. In particular, their notion of "micro-negotiations" seems exactly what I am looking for to describe the majority of acts of curatorial creation. Kukla distinguishes between top-down and bottom-up actions, and within the latter category, between actions undertaken with intentions to reshape the environment and those without such intentions. Perhaps the biggest difference between Kukla's approach and mine is this. Kukla's focus is on (and their heart clearly with) both kinds of bottom-up action in contrast to the top-down. Mine is on top-down actions and bottom-up actions with intentions in contrast to the bottom-up actions without intentions. This is because intentions play a big role in my theory of artifacts generally, as explained in Sect. 2. This difference has ramifications for the ontology of the object worked on (be it city or language) but discussion of this must await another occasion.

¹⁶ I rely here greatly on Marazzini (2011). All the primary documents are to be found in Vitale (1984).

Tuscan, and particularly Florentine, dialect was agreed on by most, but in different ways. Alessandro Manzoni, best known for his novel *I promessi sposi*, proposed a standardized language based on the then-current (early nineteenth-century) Florentine dialect.¹⁷ This, of course, was not at all the idiom of the Three Crowns of fourteenth century Florence, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, whose great works stood at the origin of a literary tradition that had taken on a life of its own. Some looked back on this glorious epoch for the standard, others looked to rural Tuscany. Graziadio Ascoli objected to Manzoni's view (and by extension to all these other views) on the grounds that it would be meaningless for most Italians to have imposed on them one language standard (or dialect) which had no resonances for them. "For [Ascoli], the traditional literary language must be the basis of Italian, but its evolution as the national language of the Italians could only be the product of an increased and intensified *cooperative intellectual activity on the part of the Italian people*, a condition which he still regarded as lacking" (Maiden, 1995, 9; my emphasis). Ascoli's penetrating opinion sounds like a recognition of the importance of curatorial creation and a call for more of it.

The example of the *questione della lingua* brings out how important literature is in the context of curatorial creation. The significance of a national literary canon (in this case Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch) is evident. I mentioned at the outset, in passing, how I thought the account of the curated artifact could also be applied to nations. Nations and languages are, of course, deeply intertwined. In his influential treatment of nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1991) describes the important role played by what he calls "nationalist novels" in the formation of national consciousness. Such novels often helped develop nationalist consciousness by their deployments of language. For example, in Latin America, there was disagreement over how much the idioms of the new countries should be uniform (in the case of Spanish) and tied to the European metropolises and how much they should take on their own unique characters. For proponents of the latter goal, "literature created a sense of cultural distinctiveness by incorporating particular linguistic forms and indigenous vocabulary" (Castro & Salkjelsvik, 2024).

But there are also other ways in which literature has an intimate relation to language curation. It is not uncommon to see especially poets conceiving of their artistic work as engaging directly with the language itself in which they write. For example, the British poet John Cassidy says that poetry "keep[s] open possibilities in the language, modes of thinking and feeling which would not otherwise be registered. It may not purify, but *it could extend, the dialects of the tribe*" (my emphasis).¹⁸ Here, the poet is identified with an expansive form of curation, "extending the dialect of the tribe."

A more nuanced view is urged by the critic and poet Daniel Tiffany (in preparation). Discussing lyric poetry, Tiffany starts by invoking a familiar opposition between poets, "partisans and caretakers of language," and other language-users

¹⁷ Manzoni truly put his money where his mouth was. After *I Promessi Sposi* was first published in 1825–6, he rewrote it in the Florentine dialect he championed for its 1840 edition!

¹⁸ I take the quotation from Christie (2024). No source is given there for it and I have not been able independently to verify it.

afflicted by “anxieties about verbal communication and knowledge, arising at once from the unreliability of language fabricated and relayed by the technical media, from the rapid emergence (and disappearance) of commodified vocabularies—and from the ordeal of verbal dislocation caused by a global crisis of forced migration.” Unlike the view expressed by Cassidy, poets are here seen as performing what I have called the containing moment of curation and what Tiffany later calls the “the curatorial sanctions which help to sustain lyric diction.” By contrast, it is the verbal dislocation and unreliability of non-poetic language in which language has the potential to expand and change. Tiffany, however, complicates this simple opposition with the claim that poetry itself may already manifest the verbal “stupidity” that characterizes the unruly language of dislocation. Poetry, therefore, might reimagine its “custodial task” and seek “not to eliminate stupidity from language, or explain it, or to shake off the paralysis of shame” (i.e. not to sustain lyric diction) but rather “to inhabit elementary failures of language, surrendering to its inherent (or acquired) maladaptation.”

4 Language, languages, and authority

Not all linguistic activity involves curatorial creation and so it may help to examine at least two cases where that process plays no role in order to get more of a feel for it. These cases are very different from each other and for that reason serve well to place the idea of curatorial creation in relief. The first case is of languages that owe their existence to something other than curatorial creation, namely artificial languages. We can learn an important lesson from comparing two of these. In 1879–80, Johann Schleyer created the language Volapük.¹⁹ He thought God had directed him to provide the world with a universal language, sat down at his desk, and created it (by writing a grammar and dictionary that indicated or selected the abstract lexicon that was to be the language’s matter, as described above). The language gained a small, but increasing following, especially among South German Catholics. Various societies, publications, and conferences followed. But, in fairly short order, it all fell apart. Schleyer, unwisely, attempted to maintain an iron control over the language he had created. Changes could only be made with his personal approval. The impulse to control one’s creation is perfectly understandable but where the creation is a language intended for widespread use, it is a death sentence. Languages need curatorial creation by their users, they need to breathe with alternating moments of expansion and contraction, and Schleyer’s behavior was designed to prevent that.²⁰

Ludwik Zamenhof, the creator of Esperanto, in 1887, had quite different ideas about language. Having performed his creative work, he quite deliberately stood

¹⁹The basic story is told in a number of places. I have mainly relied on Garvía (2015) for Volapük and Esperanto.

²⁰The travails of Volapük became an object of comedy in France. One wag mocked: “The students have finally decided that they know better the new language than the one who invented it” (quoted in Garvía (2015, 35)).

back and let the users and speakers of Esperanto, as I would say, curatorially create it. The Declaration of Boulogne (1905), drafted by Zamenhof, clearly states:

Because the author of the language Esperanto refused once and for all, right at the beginning, all personal rights and privileges in relation to that language, accordingly Esperanto is “nobody’s property” either in material or in moral respects. (Quoted in Fians (2021, 129))

This attitude itself has been enthusiastically taken up by subsequent Esperantists. As Guilherme Fians (2021, 143) notes, while in other cases (especially of minority or endangered languages) people “fight for authority over their languages, prominent Esperantists seem to fight against being seen as authoritative figures.” (Fians’s whole chapter on this is worth reading.) One might say that the spirit of curatorial creation has been built into the very DNA of Esperanto owing to its original sole creator’s understanding of what is necessary for the continued existence of a language. It therefore exemplifies curatorial creation even more explicitly than natural languages. Esperanto now boasts second-generation native speakers! This is a staggering fact if one thinks about it.²¹ The language, because it was allowed to be sustained in the way that is natural for languages, has transcended its origins as an artificial language and become a wholly different kind of thing. It has, as paradoxical as this may seem, become a natural language.

Most natural languages, of course, do not need to perform this labor of transcendence since they have no origins in the action of a single person or a determinate plurality of persons. But this raises a natural objection to my claim that the curation of a language, consisting in the kinds of activities I have suggested, should be thought of as genuinely creative. The curation of Esperanto was both possible but uncreative, it might be urged, because the creation had already been seen to by Zamenhof. If the curation of English or Italian is of the same order, it too cannot be creative. And with the absence of anything playing Zamenhof’s role, the claim that natural languages are artifacts of any kind might seem implausible.

To answer this objection, it will help to turn to the other situation I want to look at in which linguistic activity is not accompanied by curatorial creation. Here, the point is that we have, not an artificial language, as we did in the cases of Esperanto and Volapük, but no language at all. I am referring to Davidson’s (1986) well-known claim that there is no such thing as a language. Clearly, I disagree with this view. But there is something very important that Davidson gets right, which is that it is *possible* to have linguistic communication without a language—language without languages. What a hearer needs is an ad hoc theory (what Davidson calls a passing theory) assembled with “wit, luck, and wisdom” (446) to interpret the utterances of a speaker, and what a speaker needs, if they wish to be understood, is a good initial approximation of the hearer’s ad hoc theory. A language is an instrument that can

²¹ I get this claim from Okrent (2010, 84). It is not mentioned in Fiedler and Brosch (2022, 53–58), who discuss the nature and number of native speakers of Esperanto. As Fians (2021, 146–147) points out, however, what it means to be a native speaker of Esperanto, and the relative authority of native versus non-native speakers of the language, is quite different from the situation with most other languages.

play—that usually plays—a massive role in facilitating exchanges by providing a ready-made basis for a hearer’s passing theory. It may well not be identical to that theory, but knowing English will be a pretty good start for understanding people in England. But people can communicate, linguistically, even with no language in common. What they need, as Davidson says, is wit, luck, and wisdom.

Such, indeed, must be the situation at the birth of many languages. Creoles arise precisely out of the linguistic interaction between people without a language in common. They will begin by speaking in their own languages, slowly and (most importantly) loudly, in situations where context makes very clear what their communicative intentions are. Various compromise formations will evolve, on the basis of wit, luck, and wisdom, and be preserved through imitation and exigency. This does not yet constitute having a new language, in the sense at issue in this paper. There is linguistic activity without a language on quite a large scale but the activities of language curation would find no foothold. (Think of trying to make verbal jokes or to write poetry or to found a language academy in the context of a *developing* creole!) Eventually, however, the results of their efforts may (though they need not) become an object of cooperative concern, i.e. of ongoing curatorial creation. This is particularly likely to happen if there are others known who do not use this developing instrument of communication. In that case, speakers will become conscious of an object they have and continue to keep in existence. At this point, poetry, puns, preservation of linguistic heritage, grammatical correction, language academies, and the full apparatus of curatorial creation, may ensue. But for a while, at least, there was linguistic communication, language, without the existence of a language, something that features in the expansive and contractive intentions of its speakers.

As I have presented the formation of a creole here, it is a cooperative venture between speakers of two languages who want or need to communicate with each other. But one might wonder whether all cases of language contact are as cooperative as this. Might not different languages simply rub up against each other, eventually producing a new language without anyone’s having intended anything?²² It may certainly happen that two peoples who each speak in their own ways mingle and slowly come to speak in a new, common third way. But keep in mind that I have characterized languages as cultural objects that people care about, and not, as Chomsky thinks of E-languages, as mere abstractions from ways of speaking. In the envisaged situation, there may only be language, without languages, as I use the term “language.” Only when ways of speaking come to feature in people’s intentions can they constitute a language.

We are now in a position to answer the question of how curatorial creation can be genuinely creative. Where there is no obvious creative role for a Zamenhof, the process of curatorial creation begins uncertainly and slowly, on the basis of shared habits and expectations among speakers. Gradually, out of this immediately need-driven communicative activity there comes to coalesce the sense of an enduring instrument and with this sense, the need both to expand and contain it. Like all gradual beginnings, there are no fixed stages here but rather a gathering of energy and activity. Even as a language comes to exist as something that requires a stable identity, it is

²²Thanks to a referee for pressing this concern.

subject to the constant bombardment of small changes, both deliberate and accidental. This is the moment of innovation and expansion in which people care for their language by enriching it, sometimes unconsciously and without intention, but, as I have claimed, often with a clear understanding of what they are doing. Without this force the language will stagnate and come to act as an instrument of oppression of its speakers. But equally, the innovative moment, which unchecked will lead to multiple dialects and idiolects, must be reined in. This is the moment of containment. Even where there is a Zamenhof at the birth of the language, curatorial creation is required for its persistence. A single creator's will is not enough either to sustain or to contain it. (Hence the mixture of tragedy and absurdity in Schleyer's attempts at once to invent a real language and then subject it to his will.) This dialectic is clearly recognized by speakers of Esperanto but it occurs, and must occur, with all living languages.

Here is the place for some brief remarks on grammar Nazism. When people get hot under the collar about split infinitives and other such niceties, they often place themselves in camps of prescriptivists ("you shouldn't split infinitives") and descriptivists (grammatical rules are just the codification of what people used to do—they give us no reason to continue to do that). I have described myself sometimes, using a familiar meme, as "descriptivist in the streets, prescriptivist in the sheets." In my heart, I want to correct split infinitives though my 'official' view is that there is no good justification for doing so. I think the framework I have tried to articulate here helps us see that my cognitive dissonance is actually not inappropriate. People are, or should be, free to make of language whatever they want. As Zamenhof says, it is nobody's property. And yet, the need to be able to understand each other and to be involved with a common project does exert some pressure towards conformity. A language needs both its descriptivists and its prescriptivists.

5 Language death

We have discussed how languages are brought into existence and kept alive through a continuous process of curatorial creation. How do they die? They can die in (at least) two ways. Some have disappeared without a trace. In such a case, the matter of the language, the abstract lexicon, does not cease to exist. But there is nothing now that indicates it, or selects it, and in effect, it becomes invisible amidst the infinite welter of such structures until, and unless, someone or some ones come to indicate it again and make a new language out of it. (A massively improbable event, needless to say.)

Other languages die by becoming dead languages. I define a dead language as a language of which detailed knowledge is preserved but that has no native speakers. In these cases, the concept *language* is still imposed on the matter (the matter is indicated and the language bears the trace of its cultural import) but since the language no longer has native speakers (or possibly any speakers at all), it does not breathe with the expansive and contractive work of curation.

It might be thought that Latin is the example *par excellence* of a dead language. It is, however, a more complicated case. Latin continued, all the way into the modern era, to be used, in spoken and written contexts, as a language of theology, science,

and diplomacy. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in particular, formal Latin education in schools often required that pupils actually use Latin with each other at all time, in their play, for example. It is hard to imagine that this did not involve at least some innovation on the part of the speakers concerned. There have also been attempts to make Latin a fully living language again. At the same time, Latin's utility was often quite explicitly based on the idea of its unchanging nature. Particularly in the realm of theology, it was felt that only an unchanging language was suitable for the service of an unchanging deity. (It is, needless to say, only the absence of native speakers that gives any chance of absence of change.²³) The forces of containment, therefore, were much stronger than is typical with a genuinely living language, even though Latin could hardly be said to have been altogether dead in these circumstances.²⁴

Finally, we should say something about attempts to revivify languages which are on the point of becoming dead and to make of them fully living languages. Breton, Gaelic, Hawai'ian, Corsican, and many, many other languages have been objects of such attempts. Some of these attempts have been more successful than others, but in general they display distinctive patterns around innovation and containment. Along one dimension, innovation is enormous. A language of a few elderly people is introduced into schools, grammars are written, vocabulary developed, literature produced, spelling bees held, and so on. At the same time, containment is equally powerful since success of the variant of the language chosen as a standard requires suppression of rival variants, often variants actually spoken by the few remaining native speakers. The necessity for such potent counter-forces to be in play cannot help but make contexts of language revivification fraught and, often, tragic.²⁵

Acknowledgments An earlier version of this paper was given at the conference Works of Art and Technical Artifacts: Towards a Unified Account?, organized by the Philosophy of Experiential Artifacts group at the University of Genova. I thank the participants of the conference for their helpful feedback, especially Enrico Terrone and AWEaton. The paper was also read and discussed by the online Words Workshop, with many helpful suggestions from Nikki Ernst, Mark Lance, Sally McConnell Ginnet, Devin Morse, Naomi Scheman, and Kelly Weirich. Alison Springle helped me think about collective action. Daniel Tiffany graciously shared and discussed with me his work in progress. Two referees for this journal helped improve the paper enormously and I am grateful to them.

Declarations

Competing Interests Not applicable.

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²³ Even that is not sufficient, however, as is shown by the publication of the *Lexicon recentis latinitatis* (*Lexicon of Modern Latin*) between 1992 and 1997, under the auspices of the Institutum Altioris Latinitatis, founded by Paul VI in 1964 "to give training in fluent and elegant written Latin" (Waquet 2001, 77).

²⁴ I rely in this paragraph on Waquet (2001).

²⁵ For an incisive analysis of the double motion of expansion and contraction, in relation to a Corsican spelling bee, see Jaffe (1996). For one overall assessment of such projects which brings out their tragic dimension, see Romaine (2011). I hope to write more about this on another occasion.

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