



HAL
open science

Through the looking glass: Politics of language and nature, and the disqualification of vernacular forms of knowledge

James Costa

► **To cite this version:**

James Costa. Through the looking glass: Politics of language and nature, and the disqualification of vernacular forms of knowledge. *Language, Culture and Society*, 2020, 2 (1), pp.126-134. 10.1075/lcs.00024.cos . halshs-02931823

HAL Id: halshs-02931823

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02931823>

Submitted on 7 Sep 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Through the looking glass: Politics of language and nature, and the disqualification of vernacular forms of knowledge

James Costa, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle / LACITO (CNRS UMR 7107)

james.costa@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr

As I revise this text, the Amazon is burning; farmers claim that they want to be able to cultivate land; to them, that means that the forest has to go. Indigenous communities are launching international appeals to save their land and means of subsistence, while the far-right, corporate-backed Brazilian President blames NGOs for the fires. This disastrous set of events doesn't just jeopardize the future of life on Earth as we know it, it is embedded in webs of political action entangled with at least two centuries of alliances between modern, scientific forms of knowledge production and corporate, capitalist interests (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016). At the heart of the current state of capitalist societies thus lies a complex form of knowledge legitimation which we call science, and which has, in its natural sciences avatars in particular, sought to conceal its ideological involvements and entanglements. In this perspective, the "Anthropocene" isn't a geological era but a political regime "which assembles species thinking, a fascination with nonlife and sovereignty, and the imaginary of extinction and mutation" (Luisetti, 2019, p. 342).

Speaking of the Anthropocene is be a fraught enterprise, but it is one that sparks a number of considerations in terms of who, or what, counts as a political agent or actant (Haraway, 2016). As a period reframing human agency, capitalism and colonialism over a longer period than, say, neoliberalism, it raises questions which echo Hutton's concerns. Anthropocenic concerns also suggest that vital questions ought to be reframed in terms of how worlds are or ought to be composed (Latour, 2010). In this short essay, drawing on Hutton's proposition that doing science is often a risky epistemological business, one in which the reflections of one's discourse in unexpected mirrors materialise in unanticipated circumstances, I want to propose a (too) short exploration of how scientific endeavours have oft consisted in a disqualification of vernacular knowledge. The question of vernacular knowledge is most often treated as

a question of epistemology – what Blaser (2016, p. 548) calls “reasonable politics”: treating vernacular knowledge as culture or belief, as opposed to scientific knowledge. Some anthropologists, however, are increasingly calling for considering radical difference not as a matter of culture but as one of ontology (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017). In his paper, Hutton raises epistemological questions that are framed within similar, nationalist, colonial or postcolonial western or Modern ontologies. Yet, introducing nature in the equation, as the editors of this issue asked me to do, requires reframing parts of the debate in terms of ontology – in terms of what worlds humans inhabit, including linguistically. Bringing “nature” into the equation urges us to think about what worlds people compose and occupy, and about how different people conceptualize difference itself: “Precisely because of the primacy of an epistemology predicated on the notion that knowledge is a relation between a real world out there and representations of it, Universal Science plays the primary role of arbiter in reasonable politics, especially in the exercise of ranking the putative factuality of different perspectives” (Blaser, 2016, p. 550).

In this short response, and building on ontological approaches to linguistic regimes as different linguistic worlds, I want to question how Modern forms of knowledge on language and languages were enlisted for domination purposes between humans but also between humans and non-humans. In turn, Modern forms of knowledge emerging in the early 17th century (Toulmin, 1990), allowed for the world to be thought of in terms of resources to be disposed of rather than in terms of other beings with whom worlds ought to be composed. Crucially, this made the world available for commercial exploitation, hence why the term Capitalocene rather than Anthropocene is perhaps a better one.

Hutton’s “Lost in the Hall of Mirrors,” fittingly referring to one of Modernity’s most emblematic early architectural achievements, is a particularly important and timely text for it brings up one of Modern science’s greatest fears: that of being nothing but another form of myth-making among other such forms. After all, such a preoccupation has haunted other scientific disciplines too, especially in the humanities. Levi-Strauss famously called history a modern myth, and more recently Hobsbawm pointed to the dangers of historical knowledge:

For historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers in Pakistan are to heroin addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market. Nations without a past are contradictions in terms. What makes a nation *is* the past; what justifies one nation against others is the past and historians are the people who produce it. (Hobsbawm, 1996, p. 255)

But Hutton raises another, possibly more complex question: who owns “knowledge,” who may or may not be/feel authorised to use and develop it, for what purposes? In this sense, it doesn’t matter that historians or other social scientists attempt to provide positive knowledge or seek to validate certain forms of folk knowledge. What matters at all is that they speak from a position of power/knowledge, one which lends their narrative credibility, and thus value – that of “reasonable politics”. But the world that Hutton refers to is a world in which a certain regime of knowledge, in this case linguistic, still prevails, one in which scientific truth still mattered, even if it was to be subverted for purposes others than the ones originally intended – a partially common world already. The challenge today might be more extensive, for it is not just languages (*langues*) that are at stake, as in Hutton’s study, but language (*langage*) – a distinction the English language conveniently erases. And this matters because the Anthropocene returns power to non-human actants, and summons other worlds than our own, worlds in which language was not an object but little more than practice, which in turn could be shared with a wealth of non-humans.

As Hutton points out, linguistics occupies a special place within the human and social sciences: it is in many ways the closest, in terms of methodology, to the natural sciences. Lévi-Strauss (1951) extolled it as the model anthropology ought to follow, should it ever want to be viewed as a real science. Yet, as Hutton shows, linguists, sociocultural linguists (Hutton’s term) or anthropologists are poppy growers just as much as historians. But so, after all, are natural scientists. They too produce the raw material required for justifying modern forms of groupness based on languages, cultures or natures, envisaged as entities indexing or encompassing (“environing”, so to speak) naturalised groups.

Language, and languages (even those pictured as growing on trees) are heavily ideologized constructions, and the processes which have led to modern ideologies of language are part of those which crafted the modern world. It should come as no surprise that language and nature were regimented through similar epistemèes at about the same period, producing standardised forms of one and the other in the service of capitalist societies. But in both cases, this involved dismissing vernacular forms of knowledge, or perhaps rather other ontologies, to make way for institutionalized, Modern (reasonable) ones.

It derives from the above that the politics of language are usually treated as a form of societal policy and regimentation, keeping to the divide between social and natural sciences characteristic of Modernity. Yet recent works in environmental humanities are proposing that we engage with the interplay of the politics of society and nature (Blanc, Demeulenaere, & Feuerhahn, 2017), an interplay which requires to rethink forms of knowledge on language too. Forest management, for instance, is intimately tied with Imperial policies in the British Empire, in particular in India:

[...] the drive for knowledge and the penchant to divide and catalogue the world – central to the environmental project – grew from taking stock of the “inventory” of imperialism. Part of that inventory is the discovery, subjection, demarcation, and effective management of nature. Indian imperial officials inaugurated a modern forestry management system that spread from India to much of the world. This was most likely to happen, not under a democracy where a majority of users – peasants, craftsmen, and traders – could block reform, but under an authoritarian regime where colonial overlords could, for better or worse, impose their control. These environmental innovations, born of empire, mark the first clear boundaries of environmentalism. (Barton, 2002, pp. 6-7).

The type of colonial myth-making and production of knowledge that Hutton analyses thus involves not only language and culture, but also language and nature, a crucial connection as I hope to show in the rest of this paper.

Nature and the definition of language vs. non-language

The rise of modern science in the 18th century thus lies at the crossroads of the paths trodden by Hutton in his paper: expert and vernacular knowledge, the language / society nexus, the ties between politics of nature, politics of society, and politics of language, and, most importantly, the conflicts between areas of knowledge and their sources. This section thus lays out how a science of language was never merely about describing language, but also about deciding what counts as language (as opposed to various forms of non-languages, as I show below), and who counts as an individual with a language.

But first, nature. The social sciences, as well as linguistics, were heavily involved in the production of various ideologies, not just in their analysis. Indeed, while contemporary debates, for example on climate breakdown, are quick to point that science and ideology should not be mixed, modern science was, from the onset, an avowed ideological project (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016). ‘Science’ sided with Reason but also with capitalist forces in order to assist it and to legitimize its project (Fressoz, Graber, Locher, & Quenet, 2014), against other forms of knowledge that, as a conscious, radical project, refused to treat nature as a set of resources to be tapped into¹. In fact, the initial project of those known as ‘ideologues’ at the time of the French Revolution was precisely:

to found a new science of mankind and nature [...] Its purpose was to classify populations, animals and societies. On the basis of their living conditions and elements of their environment, these populations, in France and throughout the whole world, were to be evaluated according to their degree of civilization. The theoretical foundations of this project, as drawn up by Cabanis in 1796, rested on the ‘relations between the physical and the moral’ and postulated the central role of outside influences, defined by the Ideologues as everything that contributed to form the habits of body and mind. (Chappey & Vincent, 2019, p. 117).

¹ In doing so, pitting “back to nature socialism” against Marxian socialism (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016, Chapter 11). This type of non-Marxian socialism might have generated a platform for fruitful exchanges between scientific advances and traditional uses of forests and land more generally, but it was fast done away with. Far from being limited to Romantics, resistance against industrial capitalism, pollution and the destruction of the Earth did draw on traditional forms of knowledge as more equal and less destructive for the lives of communities across Europe, India and the entire British colonial empire, as well as on alternative forms of socialist theory.

In epistemological terms, the aim of Modernity is unequivocally to do away with the Old world, and the French Revolution provided precisely that opportunity. In order to align nature with productive forces, existing environmental regulations had to be done away with at the end of the 18th century (Chappey & Vincent, 2019, p. 109). Not coincidentally, it was also at that same period, from 1790 on, that the Revolutionary governments of France sought to survey the use of ‘patois’ in order to uproot them and replace them with the language of Reason (Certeau, Julia, & Revel, 1975) – or at least a revolutionary version of it (Steuckardt, 2011). In line with the Ideologues’ project, this linguistic project was devised to gain knowledge and use this knowledge to transform (and improve) living conditions in the country.

So next, language. Nowhere is the pre-modern vernacular connection between language and what we now call ‘nature’ better expressed than in a response given to Grégoire’s 1790 survey on patois by the Société des Amis de la Constitutions of Perpignan, in the Catalan-speaking part of France. Asked about how to eradicate the local patois, they retorted: “To destroy it, one would have to destroy the sun, the freshness of the nights, the kind of foods, the quality of waters, man in its entirety” (Certeau et al., 1975, p. 182). Conversely, in a 1776 account of life in Burgundy, Rétif de la Bretonne accounted for the lack of patois in the village of Nitry in contrast with surrounding areas by resorting to natural explanations: purer air, better grains producing better bread, dairy products, superior eggs and animal flesh. All those elements were then correlated with the practice of commerce, which brought inhabitants in contact with other localities and generated the need to speak politely (Certeau et al., 1975, pp. 277–278). In the next village of Saci however, one mile away, stagnant waters caused the air to be “devouring,” and the local inhabitants to be “heavy, ruminative, and taciturn” (*ibid.* 278). In France, the patois are forms of non-language that index a state of wilderness and superstition, and point to the savage (Certeau et al., 1975, Chapter 8); forms of knowledge and practices which were to be uprooted, pointing to an absence of a rational outlook on the world, a lack of industriousness (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016) and lust for more money over time.

In that particular view, the patois are immediately transparent forms of language: they are isomorphous with nature, and with emotions. Along with the ways of life of

their speakers, their *mores*, they are susceptible to description in the natural sciences sense of the term: mere mechanical facts to be described (Certeau et al., 1975, p. 154). In this representation, *mores* are opposed to *civilization* (ibid. 155), rurality to urban life, and patois to language; access to language is thus tantamount to access to civilization. The Modern category of “language” thus ought to be approached from a critical perspective, as its very foundation entailed the division of the world between language and non-language along lines that fractally reproduced the dividing lines between wilderness and civilization.

Yet rather than approaching linguistic epistemes from ethnographic or insider perspectives, modern linguistics claims that all languages are equal, meaning that all human forms of speech are equally languages. While this perspective may sound commendable for its inclusiveness, it erases non-scientific or non-modern views on language, perhaps unwillingly dismissing the ontological diversity of linguistic worlds that humans occupy (while engaging in saving ‘diversity’ by documenting it, from a western perspective). The erasure of non-western language ontologies continues through the various language documentation projects worldwide. Writing about the Aché in eastern Paraguay, Jan David Hauck thus writes:

The Aché language is not something that once was there and is now “almost gone.” On the contrary, it has just now arrived. I argue that before contact and settlement there was no such thing as “the Aché language.” What is understood today as the “real” Aché language, *ache djawuetegi*, is the result of a number of developments in post-contact history that allowed “language” to emerge as an object that could be talked about, written down, protected, and claimed for identity – but which could now also be lost. (Hauck, 2018, p. 77)

Defining society through language and excluding non-humans

Dividing and cataloguing the world, natural, cultural or linguistic, is part and parcel of the will to exploit it, as many works on the have shown (Bonneuil, 2017; Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016; Haraway, 2016). But the linguistic worlds that the Modern myth of linguistics erased were often not amenable to linguistic description and appeared very

different in terms of linguistic regimentation. Indeed, they might even have included non-humans as worthy interlocutors, and as full members of the collectives that humans inhabited (see Pastoureau, 2004 for an analysis of animal trials in late medieval Europe and the debates surrounding their capacity to take part as sentient beings). In my fieldwork experience in Provence, matched by other accounts from the rest of the Occitan region in southern France, the world (including the linguistic world) that patois speakers describe strongly associated humans and animals, to the point that those people, now in their 90s, can state that the patois disappeared when the animals were replaced by mechanized tools. As a man in his mid-90s in the Drôme area of Provence told me in July 2019, “*lo chivau, parlava pas francés*” (“the horse did not speak French”). For its absence of clear-cut distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘society’, this linguistic world, I came to realise, seemed closer to the one described above by Hauck than to that described by modern linguistics or even by language advocates, who operate based on the ontological assumptions of Modernity.

Linguistic regimes thus do not only stipulate how communication is organised within a group; they imply definitions of who, or, crucially, *what*, exists as a legitimate interlocutor (actants, selves or other beings). In ontological regimes other than the Modern, naturalist ones, those might include plants (Shebitz & Kimmerer, 2005), animals (Kohn, 2013), spirits (Taylor, 1993) in a way that redefines not only “language” to encompass dreams as well as other forms of semiosis as communication.

The erasure of such linguistic worlds proved the Perpignan revolutionary prophecy right. Along with the destruction of Patois came the destruction of the world that encompassed it. Patois, it turned out, could not be decontextualized, unlike language. What this paper points to is thus the importance of attention not only to epistemology but to ontology. In Hutton’s text, both sets of actors operate in the same ontological setting – one very different, in terms of linguistic regimes, from that described by Mitchell (2006) in pre-contact and colonial India. In the case described by Hutton, it thus seems to be the case that the distinction between expert and lay analysis is thin. I hope to have suggested at least that an approach in terms of ontology, linguistic or otherwise, not only questions that distinction; it questions the very meaning of lay and expert, and renders them irrelevant to ethnographies of non-Modern societies. Or,

perhaps more importantly, of societies or groups that seek to challenge modern ontologies radically. This distinction is perhaps not always a relevant starting point. Recognising this requires paying attention to other worlds that humans inhabit in order to avert “reasonable politics.” This, as Latour (2010) points out, requires starting from the perspective that there is no common world. Worlds need to be composed, in particular through another problematic linguistic device: (ontological) translation. In the Anthropocene more than ever before.

References cited

- Barton, G. A. (2002). *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blanc, G., Demeulenaere, E., & Feuerhahn, W. (Eds.). (2017). *Humanités environnementales: Enquêtes et contre-enquêtes*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.
- Blaser, M. (2016). Is Another Cosmopolitics Possible? *Cultural Anthropology*, 31(4), 545–570.
- Bonneuil, C. (2017). Capitalocène: Réflexions sur l'échange écologique inégal et le crime climatique à l'âge de l'Anthropocène. *EcoRev'*, 44(2017/1), 52–60.
- Bonneuil, C., & Fressoz, J.-B. (2016). *The shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, history and us*. London: Verso.
- Certeau, M. de, Julia, D., & Revel, J. (1975). *Une politique de la langue*. Paris: Gallimard Folio.
- Chappey, J.-L., & Vincent, J. (2019). A Republican Ecology? Citizenship, Nature and the French Revolution (1795–1799). *Past & Present*, 243(1), 109–140.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtz003>
- Fressoz, J.-B., Graber, F., Locher, F., & Quenet, G. (2014). *Introduction à l'histoire environnementale*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Hauck, J. D. (2018). The origin of language among the Aché. *Language & Communication*, 63, 76–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2018.03.004>
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1996). Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today. In G. Balakrishnan (Ed.), *Mapping the Nation* (pp. 255–266). London: Verso.
- Holbraad, M., & Pedersen, M. A. (2017). *The Ontological Turn*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kohn, E. (2013). *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Latour, B. (2010). An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto". *New Literary History*, 41(3), 471–490.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1951). Language and the Analysis of Social Laws. *American Anthropologist*, 53(2), 155–163. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1951.53.2.02a00010>
- Luisetti, F. (2019). Geopower: On the states of nature of late capitalism. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 22(3), 342–363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431018803764>
- Mitchell, L. (2006). Making the Local Foreign: Shared Language and History in Southern India. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 16(2), 229–248.
- Pastoureau, M. (2004). *Une histoire symbolique du Moyen Âge occidental*. Paris: Points Histoire.
- Shebitz, D. J., & Kimmerer, R. W. (2005). Reestablishing Roots of a Mohawk Community and a Culturally Significant Plant: Sweetgrass. *Restoration Ecology*, 13(2), 257–264.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1526-100X.2005.00033.x>

- Steuckardt, A. (2011). L'institution du français "révolutionné": Construction du sujet de la langue dans le Dictionnaire national et anecdotique (1790). In S. Branca-Rosoff, J.-M. Fournier, Y. Grinshpun, & A. Régent-Susini (Eds.), *Langue commune et changements de norme* (pp. 375-387). Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Taylor, A.-C. (1993). Des Fantômes stupéfiants: Langage et croyance dans la pensée achuar. *L'Homme*, 33(126), 429-447. <https://doi.org/10.3406/hom.1993.369648>
- Toulmin, S. E. (1990). *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.