

Rethinking Multilingual Democracy

Towards a Generative Relational Theory of Governance amid Relational Plurality and Heteromorphic Values

Wanhong Huang

huangwanhong@serendip.ngo

Abstract

Theories of multilingual democracy treat linguistic diversity principally as a problem of communication, of representation, of linguistic rights, or of recognition. Each addresses a real difficulty, and together they leave one thing unexplained: political disagreement in multilingual polities has not diminished in proportion to the very large improvements in translation that recent decades have produced. This paper examines a possible reason. A thought experiment supposes translation to be perfect and asks what would remain, and what remains is the coordination of values that were generated within different relational histories and that no rendering of sentences makes commensurable. The survey concedes that this conclusion is established: anthropological work on ontological conflict has argued at length that disputes of this kind concern worlds and not words, and translation theory has argued that rendering is a value-constituting operation. What that literature has largely left aside is the institutional question, and the specifically multilingual case. Against those gaps the paper advances a graded thesis, that linguistic and cultural communities embody partially distinct relational structures which influence how values are articulated, prioritized, and institutionalized without determining or exhausting them, and derives from it two governance functions that a polity under such conditions requires. It meets the objection that the notion of separate conceptual worlds is incoherent, and concedes that the resulting picture of democracy stands close to an existing account of constitutionalism amid diversity. The account supplies no institutional design, its central thesis is entered as a hypothesis, and the closing questions are held to be the more valuable half of what is offered.

Keywords: multilingual democracy; relational plurality; heteromorphic values; translation; ontological conflict; linguistic justice; governance; generativity.

A note on the standing of this paper. This is a discussion paper and the third of three. It identifies a structure, surveys what existing scholarship has made of it, marks where each account appears to run out, and proposes a direction for work. It does not complete a theory. The survey is conducted in a conceding register, because the central reframing this paper proposes has been reached before within an anthropological literature that the political theory of language rarely cites, and a paper that failed to say so would be worth less than one that says so first. The two companion papers are referred to where their results are used, and the argument is written so that a reader who has not seen them may follow it. Where a claim entered here as open is in fact occupied, or where a source has been read wrongly, correction is welcome at huangwanhong@serendip.ngo.

1 INTRODUCTION

Multilingual polities maintain elaborate arrangements for rendering their public business in several languages. The European Union adopts legislation in each of its official languages with every version equally authentic. Switzerland, Canada, India, Belgium, and South Africa each maintain arrangements of comparable ambition, and the United Nations conducts its formal business in six languages. These arrangements are expensive, they are contested, and they rest on a proposition that has organized the field: linguistic diversity presents a problem of access, and the problem is addressed by translation, by language rights, and by the representation of linguistic communities.

Something has happened to that proposition in the last two decades. The quality and availability of translation have improved by a large margin, and the cost of rendering a text from one language into another has fallen toward zero for many pairs. If linguistic diversity were principally an access problem, the political consequences of that change should be visible. Disagreement within multilingual polities appears to have persisted, and in several settings to have sharpened, across the same period.

The persistence admits of several explanations, and this paper examines one. A thought experiment makes it precise. Suppose translation were perfect, so that every sentence uttered in one language were rendered into every other without loss, instantly and at no cost. Ask what would remain of the difficulty. Two communities may then state their positions to one another with complete fidelity: the first holds a forest to be an ancestor to whom obligations are owed, the second holds it to be a stock of sequestered carbon admitting of valuation and trade. Nothing about that disagreement is relieved by the perfection of the rendering. Each party understands the other exactly, and the question of what the polity is to do about the forest stands where it stood.

What the thought experiment isolates is a residue that translation does not reach. The parties hold values that were generated within different histories of relation, to that forest and to one another, and the values so generated differ in their semantics, in the practices that sustain them, and in what they treat as a reason. Rendering sentences establishes semantic correspondence. Deciding what a polity shall do requires something further, which is the relating of those values to one another on terms that permit a determination. This paper takes the second operation as its subject and asks what a polity does when the values it must relate were generated apart.

A caution belongs immediately after that framing, because the incautious version of it is false. Speakers of different languages do not thereby hold different values, and speakers of one language disagree profoundly. The relation between linguistic community and value is looser than the vivid cases suggest, and §7 states the graded thesis this paper actually defends, on which linguistic and cultural communities embody partially distinct relational structures that

influence how values are articulated, prioritized, and institutionalized without determining or exhausting them.

Five bodies of work bear on the question. The political theory of language has examined what a polity owes to speakers of its several languages, treating language as a communicative resource whose distribution raises questions of fairness (Van Parijs, 2011; Patten, 2014; Kymlicka, 1995). Deliberative theory has grounded legitimacy in the conditions of communication among citizens (Habermas, 1996). Anthropological work on ontological conflict has argued that disputes of the kind instanced above concern differing worlds and are misdescribed as differing perspectives on one world (Blaser, 2013; de la Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2018; Viveiros de Castro, 2004). Translation theory has argued that rendering is a value-constituting operation admitting of no neutral performance (Cassin, 2014; Apter, 2013; Asad, 1986). Constitutional theory has examined, finally, how a polity may accommodate deep diversity without assimilating it (Tully, 1995). These literatures settle a considerable proportion of the subject, and one purpose of this paper is to record how much; the survey below accordingly proceeds by conceding first and locating what remains afterwards.

The account offered here is developed within a framework the author has set out elsewhere, and which may be stated in a sentence:

Generative Relational Being. *A theory of how subject, meaning, value, creation, and normativity co-emerge through generative relational processes.*

Three features of the framework bear on the present subject. Values are treated as generated within relations, so that a plurality of relational histories yields a plurality of values as a matter of course. Relations are treated as generative, in that a relation in working order produces further determinations of meaning, of value, and of what the relation itself requires. The framework carries, third, a methodological commitment governing how its claims are advanced, its keynote being historical dialectics, so that propositions are entered as revisable within a historical frame, the finitude of knowledge and of practice is acknowledged as a standing condition, and philosophical argument is joined to operable formulation where the subject admits of it. A paper written under that commitment states its claims so that they may be given up.

Applied here, these features suggest that language is one manifestation of relational plurality among several, and that the difficulty a multilingual polity faces is a case of a wider condition. Sections 8 through 9 develop that suggestion and derive from it two governance functions that a polity under such conditions requires.

This is a discussion paper, and its role is correspondingly limited. It identifies a structure, surveys what existing scholarship has made of it, marks where each account appears to run out, and proposes a direction for work; it does not complete a theory, and several of its central propositions are entered as hypotheses awaiting examination. Three matters lie outside

the undertaking. The paper proposes no institutional design, and §13 explains why none follows from the account. It takes no position on language policy in any particular jurisdiction. It leaves aside, third, the empirical study of multilingual institutions, which would require methods the paper does not employ.

Four contributions are offered, claimed with differing degrees of confidence. The first is a mapping, locating which questions in this area appear settled and which appear open, and retaining its value independently of whether the proposals below are accepted. The second is the graded thesis of §7, which occupies the space between the claim that language determines value and the claim that language is transparent to it. The third is the derivation in §9 of two governance functions from the conditions stated, which connects this paper to its companions by argument in place of cross-reference. The fourth is a reading of democracy under these conditions, advanced in §10 with an acknowledgement that it stands close to an existing account. The questions set down in §14 are held to be the more valuable half of what is offered.

2 SCOPE AND METHOD

2.1 *The Containment Device*

Three questions organize the discussion, and material earns its place by discharging one of them:

- (i) *The residue.* What remains of the difficulty of multilingual governance once the problems of access, rendering, and representation are supposed solved.
- (ii) *The source.* What accounts for the residue, and what relation holds between linguistic community and the values a community holds.
- (iii) *The response.* What a polity facing the residue is required to do, and what that requirement makes of democracy.

2.2 *The Conceding Register*

A theory whose components are individually unoriginal may still contribute through the manner in which it joins them, and the joining becomes visible only where the components are correctly attributed. The argument of this paper is architectural, and an architectural argument is weakened by any claim to have quarried its own stone. Where a claim that might have been advanced here appears to be occupied, the relevant section says so and names the occupant. Two sections consist largely of such concessions, and they are placed before the constructive material for that reason.

2.3 *The Relation to Two Companion Papers*

The argument reaches, at §9, two governance functions that companion papers treat at length. The functions are derived here from the conditions this paper sets out, so that a reader may follow the argument without having seen the companions, and the companions are cited where their results are used. The derivation is the point: two papers that were written separately are shown to answer questions that a third set of conditions generates.

2.4 *A Note on Sources*

The survey draws on political theory, philosophy of language, social and cultural anthropology, sociolinguistics, and translation studies. These fields cite one another unevenly, and the central observation of this paper was reached within one of them some decades ago and has not travelled into the others. Where that has occurred it is recorded, since the failure of a finding to travel is itself informative about the state of a subject.

3 EXISTING PERSPECTIVES AND THE PROBLEMS THEY ADDRESS

Each established perspective on multilingual democracy identifies a real difficulty and addresses it. This section sets them out by the problem each takes itself to solve, and records in each case what the perspective brackets.

3.1 *Equal Participation*

The liberal treatment takes the difficulty to be one of access. A citizen who cannot follow the proceedings of a legislature, read a statute, or address an official in a language they command is excluded from political life by a barrier that has nothing to do with their standing as a citizen. The remedies are translation, interpretation, multilingual publication, and the conduct of official business in more than one language.

The perspective assumes that political disagreement, once the barrier is removed, is disagreement of the ordinary kind, conducted among citizens who now understand one another.

3.2 *Mutual Understanding*

The deliberative treatment takes the difficulty to be one of communicative reach. Habermas (1996) grounds the legitimacy of norms in the conditions under which they could be adopted through discourse among those subject to them, and a polity whose members cannot address one another falls short of those conditions. Translation on this account serves understanding, and understanding serves legitimacy.

The perspective assumes that the conditions of discourse, once secured, permit the parties to arrive at agreement or at a reasoned recognition of their disagreement.

3.3 *Linguistic Justice*

The distributive treatment takes the difficulty to be one of unequal burden. Van Parijs (2011) examines the consequences of a shared language for those who must acquire it, argues that the spread of a lingua franca distributes costs and benefits unevenly, and considers what fairness between linguistic groups requires. The treatment is careful and it is explicitly economical in its conception of language: language figures as a communicative resource whose distribution raises questions of justice.

May (2015) presses the objection that concerns the present paper, holding that an account of language confined to its communicative reach passes over its symbolic and identity-constituting functions. The objection has been contested by its target, and it identifies precisely the dimension that this paper takes up.

3.4 *Recognition*

The multicultural treatment takes the difficulty to be one of standing. Kymlicka (1995) grounds minority rights in the role a societal culture plays in furnishing a context within which choices are meaningful, and Taylor (1994) argues that misrecognition inflicts a harm distinct from maldistribution. Language on these accounts carries identity, and its public status is accordingly a matter of justice.

The perspective assumes that recognition, once extended, permits the recognized to participate as they are. What recognition does about the coordination of a polity whose members are recognized as differing is a further question.

3.5 *The Common Assumption*

<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Problem addressed</i>	<i>Principal remedy</i>	<i>What it brackets</i>
Equal participation	Exclusion by linguistic barrier	Translation and multilingual provision	Whether understanding resolves the disagreement
Deliberative	Communicative reach among citizens	Conditions of discourse	Whether discourse conditions settle value conflict
Linguistic justice	Uneven burden of a common language	Rights, territoriality, compensation	The symbolic and value-carrying functions of language
Recognition	Standing of linguistic communities	Public status and minority rights	Coordination among the recognized

The perspectives share an assumption that the thought experiment of §4 is designed to test. Each treats language as the locus of the difficulty, so that a polity which has addressed access, burden, and standing has addressed what linguistic diversity presents. None is mistaken

about the difficulty it names. The question is whether the difficulties they name exhaust the subject.

3.6 *Findings and Residue*

Four perspectives address four real difficulties and supply remedies for each. All four locate the difficulty in language and treat the coordination of a polity as a further matter, to be conducted once linguistic obstacles are removed. Whether anything of consequence survives their remedies is the question of the section following.

4 THE RESIDUE AFTER PERFECT TRANSLATION

4.1 *The Supposition*

Suppose translation to be perfect. Every utterance in any language is rendered into every other without loss of sense, instantly, at no cost, and with the fidelity of the rendering acknowledged by all parties. The suppositions of §3 are thereby satisfied in the strongest available form: no citizen is excluded by a barrier of language, no party bears the burden of acquiring a common tongue, and every community addresses the polity in its own terms.

Ask what remains.

4.2 *The Case*

A polity must determine the disposition of a forest. One community within it holds the forest to be an ancestor, standing in a relation of obligation that its members did not choose and cannot dissolve, such that the question of felling is not a question about a resource. Another holds the forest to be a stock of sequestered carbon, correctly valued by the methods used for valuing such stocks, such that the question of felling is a question about a rate.

Under the supposition, each community states its position and the other receives it exactly. The first understands what a carbon stock is and what valuing it involves. The second understands what standing in a relation of obligation to an ancestor amounts to. Neither is confused, and no further rendering is available to be performed.

The determination the polity must make stands where it stood. What is required is a decision about what the polity shall do, and the positions before it are related in no way that yields one.

4.3 *The Residue Isolated*

Working hypothesis on the residue. *The difficulty that survives perfect translation concerns the relating of values to one another on terms permitting a determination. Rendering establishes what each party is saying. Governance requires, further, that what the*

parties are saying be brought into relations of priority, of equivalence, of threshold, or of admissibility, and no operation on sentences supplies those relations.

4.4 *The Standing of the Argument*

The thought experiment is a presentational device and the conclusion it reaches is held widely. Three attributions are owed.

Work on the political dimension of disagreement has long held that improved communication leaves conflict substantially intact where the conflict concerns interests, power, or values. Shapiro (1999) presses this against deliberative accounts, and Mouffe (2000) holds conflict to be constitutive of the political and treats the expectation of consensus as a misunderstanding of it.

Anthropological work on ontological conflict has reached the same conclusion by a different route, and §5 treats it at length.

Translation theory has established that rendering is never a neutral operation, so that the supposition of perfect translation is itself questionable. Quine (1960) argues that reference is underdetermined by the evidence available for translation. Cassin (2014) treats the untranslatable as the sign of the way in which conceptual networks fail to superimpose across languages. Apter (2013) presses the political consequences of assuming frictionless equivalence, and Asad (1986) records the asymmetry of the languages between which anthropological translation is conducted.

What the supposition contributes is accordingly modest. It sets the conclusion out in a form that isolates the residue by stipulation, and it does so in the setting of democratic governance, where the conclusion has been less often drawn than in anthropology and translation studies.

4.5 *Findings and Residue*

Perfect translation leaves a residue, and the residue concerns the relating of values, leaving the rendering of sentences aside. The conclusion is established in three literatures, and the stipulative framing that isolates it in the democratic setting is the paper's contribution here.

5 ONTOLOGICAL CONFLICT AS AN ESTABLISHED OBJECT OF STUDY

The largest concession of this paper is owed to a literature that reached its central observation some decades ago.

5.1 *The Established Position*

Blaser (2013) treats conflicts of the kind instanced in §4 as conflicts between differing realities, and argues that describing them as differences of cultural perspective upon a single world

subordinates one party in advance. His central case concerns an orca that one party identified as a whale of interest to marine biology and another as a returned chief, and the structure of that case is the structure of the forest.

de la Cadena (2015) examines the entry of Andean earth-beings into political dispute and argues that the category of culture is inadequate to what occurs there, since what is at issue is an antagonism between worlds. Escobar (2018) develops the vocabulary of the pluriverse, a world in which many worlds are accommodated, in explicit opposition to an ontology admitting one. Descola (2013) supplies a systematic typology of the schemes by which collectives compose relations among humans and non-humans.

Viveiros de Castro (2004) supplies the treatment closest to the argument of §4. Communication across such divisions is characterized as controlled equivocation, on which the difficulty is not that the parties fail to find a common referent but that each supposes the other to be referring to what they refer to themselves. Stated in that form, the point of §4 was made two decades before this paper.

5.2 *The Concession Stated*

Two propositions that a relational account might wish to advance are occupied by this literature. The proposition that disputes of the instanced kind concern differing worlds and are misdescribed as differing views of one world is its founding commitment. The proposition that such disputes are not relieved by improved translation, and that a proclaimed equivalence across them subordinates the weaker party, is stated within it directly.

5.3 *The Residue*

Two things appear to remain.

The literature is thin on institutions. Stengers (2005) offers a procedural proposal organized around figures of diplomacy and around the deliberate slowing of consensus, and states that the proposal is not a programme. Latour (2004) offers the developed institutional treatment, proposing a constitution for a collective assembled through stated procedures, and Meyer (2012) argues that the proposal remains underspecified at the point where it would have to generate legitimate resolutions. The vocabulary of the uncommons, developed in de la Cadena & Blaser (2018), describes a ground of negotiation whose vocation is expressly not to reach finality. A polity that must decide the disposition of a forest by a date is left with little.

The literature is largely silent on language. Its cases concern indigenous cosmopolitics, design, and the composition of collectives, and the specifically multilingual condition of a polity conducting business in several official languages is not its subject. The connection between that literature and the political theory of language surveyed in §3 appears not to have been made.

5.4 *Findings and Residue*

The reframing of value conflict as conflict between worlds is established, and the observation that translation does not relieve it is established with it. The residue lies in the institutional question and in the multilingual case, and the two literatures that would jointly address them have not been brought together.

6 THE OBJECTION FROM CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES

An objection stands against any account that speaks of separate worlds, and it is serious enough to be met before the constructive argument proceeds.

6.1 *The Objection*

Davidson (1974) argues that the notion of a conceptual scheme radically different from our own, and untranslatable into it, is incoherent. Identifying something as a language, or as thought, or as belief, already presupposes substantial translatability, since interpretation proceeds by attributing to the interpreted a largely true and largely consistent set of beliefs. Evidence that some activity resists interpretation in our language is equally evidence that the activity is not speech. Complete failure of translation would establish the absence of language, with no other scheme thereby exhibited, and partial failure presupposes a large shared background against which the failure is located.

Applied here, the objection holds that the two communities of §4 either understand one another, in which case they share a scheme and their disagreement is an ordinary disagreement within it, or they do not, in which case there is no evidence that the other party holds a position at all.

6.2 *The Response*

The response available to this paper concedes the objection and locates the argument outside its reach.

Davidson establishes a claim about meaning and belief. What follows is that the parties can state their positions to one another, that each can come to understand what the other holds, and that no barrier of principle prevents the rendering. The supposition of §4 grants all of this, since the supposition is that translation is perfect.

The residue identified in §4 concerns something the objection leaves untouched. Two parties may understand one another completely and hold values that stand in no relation yielding a determination. Understanding what an obligation to an ancestor amounts to is compatible with according it no weight against a valuation, and understanding what a carbon valuation amounts to is compatible with denying that the forest is the kind of thing to which valuations

apply. Convergence of meaning and convergence of value are separate matters, and the objection establishes the first.

The position taken. *Nothing in this paper requires that the parties inhabit mutually untranslatable schemes. The argument requires only that the values they hold, which they may articulate to one another without residue, stand in no antecedent relation of priority or equivalence that a determination could apply. The claim is accordingly compatible with the thesis that all languages are inter-translatable.*

Turska (2025) stages the encounter between Davidson and the anthropological literature directly, and takes from Davidson the position that the aim of interpretation is understanding, with agreement a separate matter. The distinction is the one relied upon here.

6.3 *The Consequence for the Paper's Vocabulary*

One consequence bears on how the paper speaks. The vocabulary of separate worlds, used in the literature surveyed in §5, invites the objection and is avoided below where a weaker formulation will serve. The formulation the paper defends is stated in §7 and it concerns relational structures and their influence on the articulation of values, which requires no thesis about the boundaries of schemes.

6.4 *Findings and Residue*

The objection from conceptual schemes tells against claims of untranslatability and does not tell against the claim advanced here, which concerns the relating of values, leaving the rendering of meanings untouched. The vocabulary of worlds is set aside in what follows for that reason.

7 LANGUAGE AND RELATIONAL STRUCTURE

The question of §2 concerning the source of the residue is taken up here, and the answer is deliberately graded.

7.1 *A Strong Claim and Its Difficulties*

A strong claim is available, and this paper declines it. On that claim, a language carries a scheme of concepts, values, and relations, so that the loss of a language is the loss of the relations it carried, and linguistic diversity is valuable as the vehicle of relational diversity.

Something in the neighbourhood of the claim is well supported. Maffi (2005) documents the geographic co-occurrence of linguistic and biological diversity and argues that ecological knowledge is encoded in language. Evans (2010) and Harrison (2007) examine what is lost

when languages cease to be spoken, including taxonomies, calendrical systems, and bodies of practical knowledge with no ready equivalent elsewhere.

Two difficulties attend the strong version.

The evidence for strong linguistic relativity is contested. Boroditsky (2001) reported effects of language upon the conceptualization of time, and January & Kako (2007) report a series of failures to replicate and conclude that the reported support is not established. The position that commands assent is the weaker one, on which language influences thought without determining it.

The strong version invites, second, the objection of §6 directly, since it requires that what a language carries be unavailable to speakers of another.

7.2 *The Graded Thesis*

Working thesis on language and relational structure. *Linguistic and cultural communities embody partially distinct relational structures. Those structures influence how values are articulated, which values are treated as requiring no argument, how values are ranked when they conflict, and which values acquire institutional form. They neither determine nor exhaust the values a community holds.*

Four features of the thesis deserve notice.

It is compatible with extensive overlap. Communities differing in language may hold most of their values in common, and the thesis claims nothing to the contrary.

It is compatible with internal disagreement. A single linguistic community may divide profoundly over values, and the thesis predicts this, since a community is a population standing within many structures.

It concerns articulation, priority, and institutionalization, leaving possession aside. What the thesis claims is that a value which is readily stated, treated as needing no defence, and carried into institutional form within one community may be statable within another only with effort, contested there, and absent from its institutions.

The thesis is compatible, fourth, with change. Relational structures are produced and reproduced by what parties do, and the thesis accordingly expects communities to converge and to diverge over time.

7.3 *Language among Other Manifestations*

The thesis has a consequence for the paper's subject. If what generates heteromorphy is the plurality of relational structures, then language is one manifestation of that plurality and is neither its source nor its only expression. Professional formations, religious communities, regions, generations, and occupational practices generate relational structures of the same kind, and the difficulties this paper examines arise among them without any difference of language.

Multilingual democracy is accordingly treated below as a case in which relational plurality is unusually visible, since it is marked by an observable difference that institutions already register. The account offered extends to cases lacking that marker.

7.4 Findings and Residue

The strong claim about language and relations is not defended, and its empirical support is weaker than its rhetorical appeal. The graded thesis stated above is what the paper defends, and it locates the source of the residue in relational structures of which language is one manifestation. Whether the thesis can be operationalized is entered among the open questions.

8 RELATIONAL PLURALITY AND THE GENERATION OF HETEROMORPHIC VALUES

8.1 The Reformulation

The framework stated in §1 treats values as generated within relations. Applied to the present subject, the reformulation runs as follows. A polity comprises parties standing within many relational structures, which have their own histories and their own practices of reproduction. Values are generated within those structures. A plurality of structures therefore yields a plurality of values differing in kind, and the difference requires no further explanation than the difference of the structures that produced them.

8.2 The Consequence for Governance

If values are generated in this way, then a polity does not encounter a fixed stock of values held by fixed groups. It encounters a continuing production, in which the structures that generate values are themselves sustained and altered by what parties do, including by what the polity decides. Governance under these conditions bears upon the production, extending beyond its momentary output.

Two things follow that the sections below take up. A polity must relate values that were generated apart, since collective action requires determinations that the values do not jointly yield. A polity's determinations enter, second, the structures that generated the values, so that what is decided bears upon what will subsequently be generated.

8.3 Findings and Residue

Relational plurality accounts for heteromorphy without further hypothesis, and language figures within the account as one manifestation among several. Governance so understood bears upon a continuing production in place of a fixed stock, which is the condition the following section addresses.

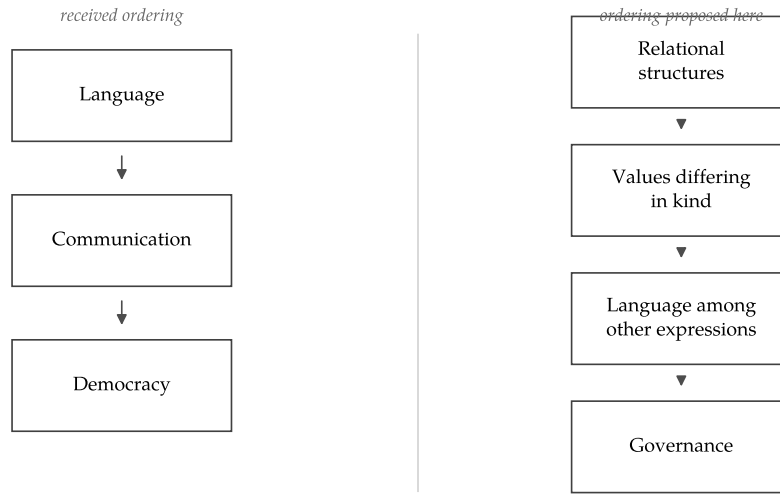


Figure 1: Two orderings of the same elements. On the received ordering, language is the locus of the difficulty and communication is the operation that addresses it. On the ordering proposed here, relational structures generate values, language is one manifestation of those structures, and governance addresses the relating of the values so generated. The figure records an ordering of concepts and asserts nothing about temporal sequence or causal magnitude.

9 TWO GOVERNANCE FUNCTIONS DERIVED

The conditions stated generate two questions that a polity cannot avoid, and each is the subject of a companion paper. The derivation is given here so that the connection among the three papers rests on argument.

9.1 *The First Function*

A polity that must relate values generated within different structures requires that the structures be represented in the relating. A determination made without reference to a structure will nonetheless bear upon it, since the polity's decisions enter the field within which that structure is reproduced.

The question of who holds standing to contribute is therefore unavoidable, and it is unavoidable in a specific form. What requires representation is a relational structure, since it is structures that generate the values at issue, and a population stands within many. A companion paper treats this question at length, and grounds standing in occupancy of a position within a structure whose reproduction is at stake (Huang, in preparation, b).

9.2 *The Second Function*

A polity that has secured representation must still relate the values so represented, since representation supplies the positions and leaves the determination outstanding. The relating is performed by some framework, whether the framework is acknowledged or operates as method, and the framework fixes relations of priority, equivalence, threshold, and admissibility among values that yield none of themselves.

The question of what makes such a framework legitimate is therefore unavoidable. A companion paper treats it, proposes a criterion under which a framework is assessed by whether it preserves the capacity of the relations it orders to generate a further determination of what it has fixed, and states the costs of that criterion (Huang, in preparation, c).

9.3 *The Order of the Two*

The two functions are distinguishable and they are not sequential. A framework for relating values is constructed by parties whose standing was settled by some arrangement, and the arrangement determining standing is itself expressed in terms that a framework supplies. The companion papers record this circularity, and the present paper takes from them the position that the two functions are analytically separable and institutionally entangled.

9.4 *Findings and Residue*

Two governance functions follow from the conditions stated: the determination of standing to contribute, and the determination of what makes a framework for relating values legitimate. Both are treated in companion papers, and their derivation here rests on the conditions of §8 in place of citation.

10 DEMOCRACY UNDER RELATIONAL PLURALITY

10.1 *The Reading Proposed*

The two functions of §9, taken together with the account of §8, suggest a reading of democratic government under these conditions.

Proposed reading. *Democracy amid relational plurality may be understood as the continuing co-production of a shared future among parties standing within structures that generate values differing in kind, conducted so that the structures retain their capacity to generate. On this reading, the aggregation of preferences and the pursuit of mutual understanding are operations within democratic practice, and the practice itself consists in the relating of what plural structures produce.*

10.2 *The Nearest Existing Account*

The reading stands close to an account already developed.

Tully (1995) treats constitutional practice amid deep diversity as a continuing intercultural conversation, governed by conventions of mutual recognition, consent, and continuity, in which accommodation proceeds without assimilation and in which cultures figure as overlapping, interacting, and internally contested in place of bounded units. The image of a constitution as an unfinished conversation among many voices, and the insistence that diversity is accommodated without being dissolved, are that account's own.

A reader who knows this work will observe that the reading proposed above restates much of it. The observation would be correct, and two differences are offered as what the present account adds.

The first concerns the object. Tully's conversation proceeds among peoples and cultures, and its subject is the recognition of their standing within a constitutional association. The account here concerns the relating of values that plural structures generate, which is a question about what a polity does after standing has been settled, and which §9 treats as a distinct function.

The second concerns the criterion. What the companion papers supply, and what a dialogical account does not, is a test applying to the frameworks a conversation produces: whether the framework leaves the relations it orders able to generate a further determination. A conversation may be impeccably conducted and issue in a settlement that forecloses, and the criterion identifies that case.

Whether these differences are sufficient to distinguish the accounts is left to the reader, and §13 records that they may not be. Should they prove insufficient, what is offered here is an extension of dialogical constitutionalism into the register of value conversion.

10.3 *Adjacent Accounts*

Three further positions bear on the reading.

Taylor (1994) develops deep diversity as a condition in which a polity accommodates several modes of belonging within one association, which is the condition the reading assumes.

Mouffe (2000) treats conflict as constitutive of political life and the expectation of consensus as a misconstrual, which supports the argument of §4 and cautions against reading the co-production proposed here as convergence.

Lijphart (1977) supplies the developed institutional answer for divided societies, in which segmental autonomy and elite accommodation permit a polity to function without its segments agreeing. The contrast is instructive. Consociational arrangements accommodate divisions treated as given, and the reading proposed here concerns the production of shared frameworks among structures that continue to generate. Whether the second is achievable

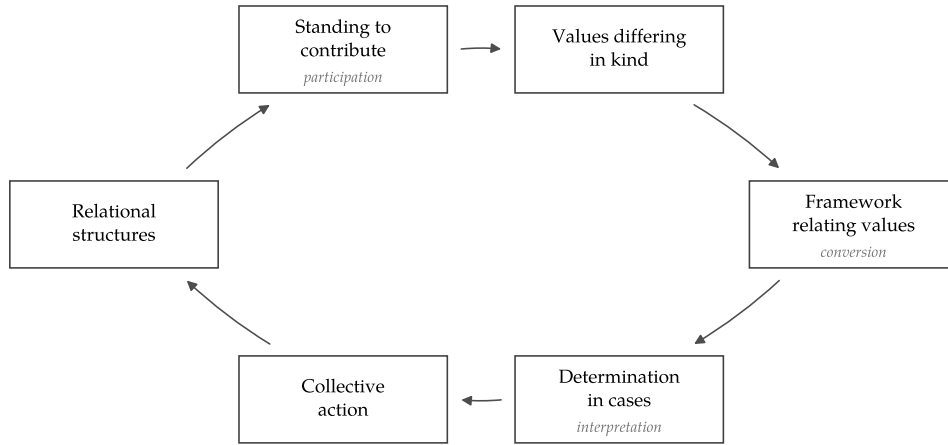


Figure 2: The circuit described in §11, with the companion papers marked at the points they treat. Relational structures generate values differing in kind; standing to contribute is settled; the values are related by some framework; determinations issue in collective action; and action bears upon the structures from which the circuit began. The figure records relations among the elements and asserts no temporal sequence, since a polity is ordinarily engaged in several at once.

where the first is what practice has settled upon is an open question.

Young (2000) develops a communicative account admitting modes of political expression that deliberative norms had excluded, and argues for representation organized around perspectives. The proposal that representation attach to structures in place of populations, entered in §9, stands close to that argument.

10.4 Findings and Residue

The reading proposed restates a substantial part of an existing account of constitutionalism amid diversity, and the two differences offered are the object of the relating and the criterion applying to its products. The reading is compatible with the position that conflict is constitutive, and it differs from consociational practice in concerning production where consociational practice concerns accommodation.

11 THE MODEL ASSEMBLED

11.1 The Circuit

The elements may be set out together.

Relational structures, sustained by what parties within them do, generate values that differ in kind. A polity requiring collective action must relate those values, which raises the question of who contributes to the relating and the question of what makes the framework performing it legitimate. Determinations issue in action, and action enters the structures from which the values were generated, so that what is decided bears upon what will subsequently be produced.

11.2 The Closure of the Circuit

One feature of the circuit bears emphasis. Its last arc is the one that distinguishes the account from a treatment of plural values as a fixed condition to be managed. What a polity decides enters the reproduction of the structures that generated the values it decided among, so that a settlement is also an intervention in the conditions of subsequent settlement. A framework that forecloses a question therefore acts upon the structures that would have raised it again.

11.3 Findings and Residue

The circuit assembles the elements and marks where the companion papers treat them. Its closing arc records that determinations bear upon the structures generating what is subsequently to be determined, which is the feature that distinguishes the account from the management of a fixed plurality.

12 APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The account bears on several settings, and this section indicates them without developing any.

Supranational associations conducting business in many languages face the conditions described in a visible form, and the arrangements they maintain for rendering and for representation address the difficulties of §3 while leaving the residue of §4 to be handled by whatever framework their assessment procedures embody.

Federal and plurinational states face the conditions where linguistic communities coincide with territorial units, and the consociational arrangements surveyed in §10 are the developed institutional response.

Governance involving indigenous communities faces them acutely, and the literature of §5 developed its account from such cases. The material of this paper suggests that the difficulty encountered there is continuous with difficulties encountered where no such community is party.

Governance assisted by automated translation faces a specific version. The account suggests that improvements in rendering address the difficulties of §3 without addressing the residue, and that a polity attributing its remaining disagreements to imperfect translation will misdiagnose them.

Settings marked by professional, disciplinary, or sectoral difference face the conditions without any difference of language, which §7 anticipated in treating language as one manifestation among several.

13 THE LIMITS OF THE ACCOUNT

The account is now complete enough to be priced.

The reframing is inherited. As §5 concedes, the observation that conflicts of the instanced kind concern differing value-worlds and are not relieved by translation was reached in anthropology some decades ago. What is offered here is the extension of that observation to the multilingual democratic setting and the connection of it to two governance functions.

The proximity to dialogical constitutionalism may be fatal. Section 10 offers two differences from an existing account of constitutionalism amid diversity. A reader who judges those differences insufficient will conclude that the reading of democracy proposed here is an extension of that account, and the paper has no further answer.

The graded thesis is unoperationalized. Section 7 states what the paper defends and supplies no procedure for identifying the relational structures at issue in a given polity, for determining which values a structure generates, or for establishing that a given difference of articulation is attributable to a difference of structure.

No institutional design is offered. The two functions of §9 are derived and are not specified. What institutions discharge them, at what cost, and with what failure modes, is outside the paper.

The empirical premise of the opening is uncontrolled. The introduction observes that translation has improved markedly while disagreement has persisted, and offers an explanation. Many explanations are available for that conjunction, including several having nothing to do with values, and this paper establishes none of them.

The strong version of the language claim is abandoned without replacement. Section 7 declines the claim that languages carry relations such that language loss is relational loss. Readers who hold that claim on independent grounds will find the account weaker than they require, and the graded thesis supplies no argument for the protection of endangered languages that the strong claim would have supplied.

Two claims are entered against this list. The derivation in §9 connects three papers by argument in place of assertion, which retains its value independently of whether the reading of democracy is accepted. The survey, second, locates with some precision where two literatures that bear on one subject have failed to meet.

14 OPEN QUESTIONS

This paper identifies a neglected connection. It does not complete a theory, and the questions below are held to be the more valuable part of what is offered.

The first group concerns the graded thesis.

- Q1.** How may a relational structure be identified independently of the values attributed to it? The thesis holds that structures influence the articulation of values, and an account that individuated structures by the values they generate would be circular.
- Q2.** What evidence would distinguish a difference of articulation from a difference of value? Two communities may state a shared value differently or hold different values, and the thesis requires the distinction while supplying no test for it.
- Q3.** How do relational structures change, and at what rate? The thesis expects convergence and divergence over time, and the mechanisms of each are unexamined here.

The second group concerns governance.

- Q4.** What institutions can discharge the representation of structures in place of populations? Existing arrangements represent territories, parties, and communities, and an arrangement representing relational structures has no established form.
- Q5.** Can consociational practice be made generative? Section 10 distinguishes accommodation of given divisions from production of shared frameworks, and whether an arrangement of the first kind can be brought to perform the second is open.
- Q6.** What follows for language policy? The account treats language as one manifestation of relational plurality, and what that implies for official status, for territoriality, and for the protection of endangered languages is undeveloped.

The third group concerns the connection this paper proposes, and the questions here are the sharpest because the claims are the strongest.

- Q7.** Does the anthropological literature on ontological conflict admit of institutional development, or does its refusal of finality preclude it? Section 5 records that the literature declines to specify arrangements, and whether that reflects a stage of development or a considered position is a question for its practitioners.
- Q8.** Is the residue of §4 continuous across cases, or does it differ in kind between the indigenous cases from which the literature developed and the ordinary cases of multilingual administration? The paper assumes continuity and does not establish it.

Q9. What distinguishes a polity that relates values well from one that relates them badly, where the criterion of the companion paper is unavailable for want of a procedure? The account leans on that criterion, and the criterion leans on an assessment nobody has shown how to make.

The last question is the one the account is directed toward, and it is placed last because everything above bears on it.

Q10. Under what conditions does a polity amid relational plurality retain the capacity of its constituent structures to generate, while still deciding what it must decide? A polity that decides nothing preserves every structure and governs nothing. A polity that decides by imposing one structure's terms governs and extinguishes what it governed. The conditions under which a polity does neither are what an account of democracy under these conditions would have to supply, and this paper does not supply them.

A closing observation about the shape of the list. The questions of the first two groups could be pursued within existing disciplines, and several are being pursued there under other descriptions. The questions of the third group could not, since they concern a connection proposed here. A reader who finds the survey useful and the reading of democracy unpersuasive may take the first and leave the second, since the survey's findings about where two literatures have failed to meet do not depend on the reading being correct.

A note on method. The paper argues by conceptual analysis and by survey, and it advances no empirical claim beyond the observation recorded in §1 that translation has improved while disagreement has persisted, which is offered as a motivation, carrying no evidential weight. The thought experiment of §4 is a device for isolating a residue by stipulation, and stipulation establishes nothing about the world.

A note on the survey. The anthropological literature treated in §5 is read here for one structural point, and its practitioners would regard the reading as thin. The claims attributed to it carry the weight of this paper's principal concession and have been stated conservatively for that reason. The empirical literature on linguistic relativity treated in §7 is contested, and the account has been drawn so that nothing in the argument depends upon its resolution.

REFERENCES

- Apter, Emily (2013). *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso.
- Asad, Talal (1986). The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology. In James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, 141–164. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Blaser, Mario (2013). Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology. *Current Anthropology*, 54(5), 547–568.
- Boroditsky, Lera (2001). Does Language Shape Thought? Mandarin and English Speakers' Conceptions of Time. *Cognitive Psychology*, 43(1), 1–22.
- Cassin, Barbara, ed. (2014). *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*. Trans. ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [French orig. 2004.]
- Davidson, Donald (1974). On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 47, 5–20.
- de la Cadena, Marisol (2015). *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- de la Cadena, Marisol, and Mario Blaser, eds. (2018). *A World of Many Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Descola, Philippe (2013). *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Trans. Janet Lloyd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [French orig. 2005.]
- Escobar, Arturo (2018). *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Evans, Nicholas (2010). *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1996). *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Trans. William Rehg. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Harrison, K. David (2007). *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Huang, Wanhong (in preparation). *Interpretive Justice in Organizations: A Preliminary Discussion of Problems and Open Questions*.
- Huang, Wanhong (in preparation). *Participation Justice in Generative Relational Being: Toward a Theory of Legitimate Participation in Relational Production and Reproduction*.
- Huang, Wanhong (in preparation). *Interpretive Justice in Heteromorphic Value Conversion: Toward a Generative Relational Theory of Legitimate Value Conversion Nomos*.
- January, David, and Edward Kako (2007). Re-evaluating Evidence for the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis: Response to Boroditsky (2001). *Cognition*, 104(2), 417–426.

- Kymlicka, Will (1995). *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Latour, Bruno (2004). *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lijphart, Arend (1977). *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Maffi, Luisa (2005). Linguistic, Cultural, and Biological Diversity. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 34, 599–617.
- May, Stephen (2015). The Problem with English(es) and Linguistic (In)justice. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 18(2), 131–148.
- Meyer, John M. (2012). A Representative Politics of Nature? Bruno Latour on Collectives and Constitutions. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 11(3), 259–275.
- Mouffe, Chantal (2000). *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso.
- Patten, Alan (2014). *Equal Recognition: The Moral Foundations of Minority Rights*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Quine, Willard Van Orman (1960). *Word and Object*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Shapiro, Ian (1999). Enough of Deliberation: Politics Is about Interests and Power. In Stephen Macedo, ed., *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, 28–38. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stengers, Isabelle (2005). The Cosmopolitical Proposal. In Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, 994–1003. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Taylor, Charles (1994). The Politics of Recognition. In Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, 25–73. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tully, James (1995). *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Turska, Julia J. (2025). Not Agreement but Understanding: Davidson, Viveiros de Castro, and the Lived Experience View on Cross-Linguistic Disagreement. *Asian Journal of Philosophy*, 4(1), art. 56.
- Van Parijs, Philippe (2011). *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo (2004). Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation. *Tipiti*, 2(1), 3–22.

Young, Iris Marion (2000). *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.