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Documentary Filmmaking and Multilingualism – A Dialogue on Practice: Interview with Dr Alastair Cole, Senior Lecturer in Film Practice, Newcastle University, UK

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Abstract

This interview explores Alastair Cole’s multilingual documentary filmmaking as a research practice that contributes to minority language rights, revitalisation, and ethnopolitical visibility. It argues that documentary cinema offers unique insights into linguistic hierarchies, code-switching, and the lived effects of language policy. Case studies such as *Colours of the Alphabet* and *Iorram* demonstrate how film engages with colonial legacies, educational systems, and cultural preservation. The article also highlights emerging digital environments – VOD platforms, social media video, and generative AI – that expand access to multilingual subtitling and circulation, while raising ethical questions around representation and translation. It concludes that documentary cinema can function as both research method and advocacy tool, supporting minority language communities and informing policy discourse.

Keywords: documentary, minority language, code-switching, VOD

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About the interviewee

Alastair Cole is a documentary filmmaker and a senior lecturer in Film Practice at Newcastle University, United Kingdom. His work aims to embrace the potential of research led creative documentary filmmaking as a uniquely valuable, public facing methodology, that can foster new insights into social science and creative practice research. His filmmaking has engaged particularly with themes intersecting with multilingualism, and relationships between language and society, building on his background in linguistic anthropology. His written work has also been published widely and he holds a PhD from the University of Edinburgh. His filmmaking and practice-based research has won multiple film industry and academic awards, with his films being released in cinemas internationally, screened at over 150 film festivals – from Cannes to Tallinn Black Nights, and New Zealand to Shanghai. His most recent feature length film, *Iorram (Boat Song)*, was released in 50 cinemas across the UK and broadcast on the BBC. His previous feature-length documentary *Colours of the Alphabet* was also broadcast in 30 languages across 52 countries. His previous short and mid-length films have also been broadcast in 27 countries and screened at festivals around the world. His films have also been the centre of UK and international impact campaigns with screenings at the United Nations, the European Union, and Westminster, as well as at museums, galleries and in hundreds of community settings across the world. See www.tonguetiedfilms.co.uk for more on his work.

Dafydd Sills-Jones (DSJ): *I understand that your documentary practice has always involved an engagement with multiple languages. Can you give a brief account of that, and perhaps reflect on some of the reasons why?*

Alastair Cole (AC): My film practice, and especially my early filmmaking was developing at the same time as my academic interest in linguistic anthropology – which I was also studying at postgraduate level. For me, the study of the relationship between language and society provided a fascinating landscape to explore what were often very universal, but often politically and emotionally engaged subjects. It was also something I saw as a field that documentary practice's audiovisual nature could explore in a unique way, especially given linguistic anthropology's emphasis on observing language use and understanding language events. I was also very fortunate that around the same time there were talent development and film funding opportunities linked to the European Union's support for multilingualism, which helped get my first few shorts made. But underneath these production opportunities was a curiosity to try and understand how documentary filmmaking could help unpack many of the themes I was busy reading about in more traditional academic research, and especially how it might bring them to a wider audience.

From my early short films to my first feature-length documentaries, questions of how multilingualism plays out in our modern world also became a linking theme. This initially led to a series of short documentaries on fairly diverse subjects from multilingual love across southern Europe (*Do You Really Love Me?*, 2011), the use of humour in Swedish-speaking Finland (*Pikku*

Kalle?, 2012), to exploring how improvised schools teaching Glaswegian were being used to help newly-arrived migrant bus drivers in the city (*C'Moan Get Aff*, 2010). Importantly, for my developing film practice I had found a context that gave me some creative boundaries, while also attaching my work to an intellectual field outside of practice itself, which felt important. This was a way to lean into the transdisciplinary nature of documentary practice, while trying to resist the temptation of diving into the next great story that crossed my horizon. It also created production contexts for my films that were very multilingual, which required careful navigation. However, these also opened up practice-based research opportunities surrounding just how to best work within them, as well as how to best communicate the intricacies and dynamics of multilingual environments to an audience.

DSJ: *Did you encounter any challenges to your way of thinking about documentary when faced with specific issues around language? This could be to do with the elusive evidentiary nature of speech, or the specific ethics or methods of dealing with multiple languages at once?*

AC: In focusing on themes around language there are many elements that documentary film practice can navigate in a unique way, purely through its audiovisual nature. However, clearly language does not stop with the spoken and visual word, and the invisible and silent moments of communication, and especially capturing and communicating the often unseen political, historic, and ideological contexts attached to language use are something that my work often aimed to explore. But at the same time, their invisible nature means they create a challenge for the form.

In written work, you have a much wider berth to offer historic, political, and theoretical contexts to guide an audience. Documentary, however, often moves and benefits from communicating through more ambiguous representations. Even with the grammar of cinema and editing to call on, I have found these unseen ideological and political aspects of language can often remain very elusive in the edit, despite being very evident during production. I've found that capturing and representing these, like so much of documentary, not only relies on thorough pre-production and research, and clarity during filming, but also creatively pushing material during the edit to embrace its multivocal potential, while offering audiences careful scaffolding to keep them with you.

In the case of *Colours of the Alphabet* (2016), a feature documentary film I made about the lack of mother-tongue education in primary education, it told the story of three Zambian Primary One children and their classroom over one year. It focused on the ideological nature of the use of English in the country, and its historical and ongoing political nature was a key theme from the start of the project. Exploring how to communicate this to audiences through the largely observational approach was also part of the practice-based research focus of the project. There were also key contextual elements that audiences needed to engage with, such as the wider linguistic setting of Zambia, where there are 72 languages spoken, seven national languages, but only one official language, which was English - despite it being spoken at home by less than two percent of the population.¹

However, it was investigating the ideological aspects of English use in the classroom which was one of the key objectives of the project, including exploring how language use was informed by the country's wider colonial history and post-independence nation building. But communicating this through the observed classroom context, and the experiences of the children at the centre of the film, was difficult. A key opportunity emerged during research and conversations with the teacher – that there would be one compulsory lesson that she would deliver which aimed to teach the Grade One students the national anthem, which is only sung in English, so was liable to be very difficult given the students neither spoke or understood it at this stage. The teacher needed to teach the first-year class of five- to seven-year-olds the political history surrounding Zambia's independence, and how that struggle was today represented through the national anthem. She undertook this admirably and with passion, while sticking to the borrowed English language terms for 'freedom' and 'independence'. Understandably, the children struggled to master the song, and the final performances were disappointing for the teacher. However, after editing the lesson, we were able to begin to unpack these very present, yet often invisible, links to the historical and nation building context that surrounded the use of English in the classroom.

On a production and methodological level, working in multilingual contexts, but a medium which traditionally communicates to audiences in one language, poses several unique challenges. As often the multilingual conversations, code-switching, and often remarkable linguistic flexibility of speakers observed on camera can be lost through the conversion to traditional subtitles or dubbing. In *Colours of the Alphabet*, the community – and most of the children – spoke the community language of Soli, and the teacher was largely speaking the wider regional language, Nyanja, to the children, as well as shifting into other regional languages of Bemba and her native Tsonga with some children in the class (all the while attempting to teach them English). For a non-Bantu language-speaking audience, these switches in language in the classroom would not have been clear. They were, however, important to communicate to all audiences, especially as often these switches were moments where the teacher was attempting to speak the children's language, or vice versa, and provided opportunities to further highlight the central themes of the film.

After testing various methods of signalling these language changes, we developed a process of using creative multicoloured subtitles in the film, where different colours were tied to a different language in the film.² Audiences were also given as a 'key' explaining this at the start of the film. This approach, which leant on methods used in HOH (hard-of-hearing) captioning, while also linking to the colour palette of the film, importantly allowed all audiences to understand who the different language community members in the film were. Something that also provided important understanding of the multilingual context and relationship between the different communities.

The impact of filming in multilingual contexts, where translation and interpreting is often necessary to navigate the risk of multiple understandings of what is going on in the room, or on screen, has also led us to specific crew structures for my films. I have found

across my projects that elevating the role of language professionals in our crew, and ideally working with someone throughout the production of the film so they fully understand the project, can go a long way to alleviate these risks.³ During the production phase in my films, where language is so important thematically and methodologically, this also involves ensuring that navigating translation processes are never secondary in production planning, or final subtitling doesn't emerge as an ex-post-facto process – when budgets are low, or distributors are leading discussions. Often some of the first people I have brought on board a project have been experienced translators who can take on a role more akin to a 'producer of language and translation'. In doing so, their input stretches to all elements of language in the project, working with me, and sometimes the producers, on preparing interpreters, watching relevant rushes or building teams of translators to navigate larger quantities of raw material. It also has extended to the final stages of production and release including developing creative subtitling approaches and supporting other international subtitlers with linguistic and contextual guidance for versioning of the film. With some of my projects they have become some of my most trusted and important allies in making a film happen.

DSJ: *What do you think the impact of technology is on the way documentary and language interact? I am referring in particular to things like the burgeoning systems for the distribution of short (vertical) reels and also the use of generative AI.*

AC: It does feel like we are in a significant moment with the impact that technologies that surround the production and the viewing of documentaries, and how this affects the way language might be engaged with by filmmakers and audiences.

The embracing of online and social media platforms for viewing video content is obviously a global shift that has really disrupted the wider understanding of media aesthetics, and also the expectations of audience. There is clearly a new videomaking language based around mobile phone cameras, with hyper-condensed storytelling, and that is often viewed without audio. I think the scale of this shift in audiences' attention away from broadcast television and cinema not only has an impact around what subjects and formats filmmakers are approaching, but also the increase in the character-shot video archives filmmakers have access to has meant a shift in the avenues stories can take.

But alongside this, there has also been a large-scale democratisation of video production, as well as subtitling technology and skills, which has been positive and empowering. To see marginalised language communities that were previously cut out of national broadcast media have the capacity to explore their own stories in their languages is important progress, and that this is being driven via the mobile phone shot content, and social media online format, highlights an interesting and important role this shift has had. Furthermore, the more material created in previously underrepresented languages also increases the chances of it breaking through to audiences that would normally not have been exposed to the content and stories of those language communities – all hopefully helping to increase the respect and support they are given, developing an appreciation of their value to our global cultural fabric.

For feature and mid-length filmmaking, I think the disruption of the traditionally direct relationships between the language of the documentary film and that of the audience was really accelerated through the emergence of online platforms as the default medium of documentary consumption over the last decade or so. While clearly subtitling in cinemas has been around for decades, and DVD and BluRay releases gave the potential for the choice of languages, they all came with limits and restrictions that meant without significant commercial rational (and collaboration with local distributors and sales agents), multilingual releases were still largely the purview of broad audience, bigger budget releases. However, the shift to VOD and mobile platforms has seen the expansion of language choice for viewers, with multilingual and accessible releases being standard even for indie doc films.

In my own practice this has created an opportunity to not only broaden audiences on release more easily, but it has meant that we can realistically consider a much wider foreign-language speaking audiences in development, which influences the choice of subject, as well as the approach and nature of release. For *Iorram (Boat Song)*, the film was released in the UK on a Ticketed Video On Demand (TVOD) cinema release with seven language options, and was fully accessible with audio description and HOH captions in both Scottish Gaelic and English.⁴ While this was a release approach driven by COVID restrictions, its multilingual nature was also something that would have been impossible for a traditional cinema release and drew significant new audiences (before returning to also screen widely in physical cinemas). However, as the film was the first ever cinema-length documentary entirely in Scottish Gaelic, one of our impact goals was to foster greater appreciation of the cultural value of regional languages in the UK. So, the initial multilingual release not only became a mechanism to have foreign language viewers across the UK view it with subtitles in their mother tongue, but also by releasing a UK film with English subtitles as just another choice alongside other international languages, we wanted to make it a conscious point of difference that linked to the impact goals of the release.

Beyond TVOD and cinema releases, the links with viewers that traditional broadcasters can now foster through online platforms has created opportunities for expanding audiences within any broadcast phase a documentary film may have, especially in relation to direct audience engagement and continuing conversations beyond the player screen. The very global nature of this shift is also something that creates potential to consciously expand releases, and the conversations surrounding them, to engage with language communities who otherwise were not included in traditional broadcast media, and who may have specific experience and connection to subjects.

During the African release of the 60-minute version of *Colours of the Alphabet*, we were able to partner with AfriDocs, an existing continent-wide documentary strand working with the satellite and cable broadcast platform DSTV, who were at the time expanding to use online channels. For us, this partnership provided an opportunity to create an impact campaign that saw the film released with subtitle options in 30 languages across AfriDocs' 50 countries, including 27 indigenous African languages. The creation of these versions required a large-

scale translation and subtitling project and was particularly challenging due to it also training translators in subtitling skills in many of the languages (for which partnering with the online subtitling platform Amara was pivotal). However, AfriDocs' expansion into online platforms at the time made it possible for audiences across the continent to view the film with subtitles in their language, many for them for the first time, and for us, it brought with it a potential audience of over 150 million viewers from the 30 language communities we targeted.

Furthermore, alongside this multilingual release, the ability to create a parallel social media campaign, encouraging viewers to share their own stories of childhood and language, was vital to fully embracing the online screening and to gauge its impact. These were specifically targeted to the 30 language communities the film was released in but expanded quickly beyond that. As a filmmaker, being able to see the audiences' conversations expand well beyond my own language knowledge, and have the film foster opportunities for audiences to share heartfelt stories of being forced to learn in a language they didn't know was touching. It was also valuable to understand the capacity of the film to foster engagement and impact in viewers. It was, however, likely not possible to have happened without the timely shift to online platforms that was underway, and the global expansion of social media over the 2010s.⁵

Today, I also see one of the potential impacts of generative AI on the relationship between documentary filmmaking and language as having the potential to dramatically increase access to multilingual subtitling and accessibility material for all filmmakers. While five years ago, with the *Colours of the Alphabet* African broadcast release, we were able to release the film in 30 languages, it was only with the broadcast partners, financial support of academic impact funds, six-months training of translators, and engaging a team of experienced subtitlers to oversee the delivery. It was a big undertaking that arguably would have been very difficult within a normal market-driven release. And while we also benefited from partnerships with online subtitling platforms, the labour involved in transcribing, translating, and timing, was extensive. Today, the introduction of generative AI into workflows to lower the labour and costs, as well as to create space for better working relationships with subtitle professionals, is significant. While the input of human understanding, especially surrounding transcription and translation, is still vital, and costs will remain, the ability to lower the human labour to create broader multilingual releases more feasibly is potentially positive.

It is also similar for the creation of accessibility materials, where the lowering of labour and costs involved in their creation increases the ability for more documentaries to have audio description and HOH captioning, and in more languages. Importantly, however, the changes in this workflow need to open up more space for closer working relationships between subtitle and accessibility material providers. It will also hopefully drive an interest from filmmakers and producers to bring language professionals into all post-production workflows. This is a fast moving field, so discussing specifics of what is possible now will potentially be out of date in six months, but assuming producers and subtitling professionals recognise the potential to work with generative AI, while also recognising the specific ethical obligations documentary filmmakers have to their subjects to translate and represent them

accurately - emphasising the need for human input - the future of increased accessibility and multilingual versioning of all documentary films, through the support from AI, is, I believe, bright.

DSJ: *What do you think the potential is for documentary cinema to contribute to the preservation of marginalised and minoritised languages?*

AC: A number of my films have engaged directly and indirectly with wider projects focusing on the preservation and growth of marginalised and minority languages, and what becomes clear is the multi-faceted nature of these campaigns, with significant roles for public policy, international and local funding, advocacy groups, but also art and media. And within this, there is a positive role that documentary cinema can play. Documentary film brings with it the ability to offer outsiders a unique window into worlds they wouldn't otherwise experience, and in the cinema, it can do so through a high-quality immersive audio and visual experience for an audience. Importantly, I think it also offers the chance to foster respect, understanding and empathising within non-local audiences, and through its translatable and accessible format, it can do so in a very global way – be it to an English, Chinese, Spanish or French-speaking audience. I also suggest that the depth of storytelling the format provides gives filmmakers a chance to add to debates around language preservation that shifts them beyond economics and falling speaker numbers, such as highlighting the wider cultural value of languages including intangible aspects, be that traditional knowledge, historic knowledge and oral histories, as well as a given language's ability to navigate contemporary debates in alternative and more nuanced ways.⁶ While much of my own filmmaking has focused on themes directly related to language, cinematic documentaries in minority languages, addressing other themes are also vital. As the cinema documentary medium offers a chance to navigate and communicate complex ideas to an audience, doing this through marginalised and minoritised languages creates a chance to counter any stereotyping around the limited capacity of a given language to address and add to global debates.

We found this during a mid-length documentary I produced, *Después de un incendio* (*After A Fire*) (directed by Miguel Hilari). The film was developed within a larger project exploring the impact of wildfires on communities in eastern Bolivia.⁷ It was, however, largely in Ayoreo, a marginalized and endangered indigenous language with approximately 5,600 speakers in eastern Bolivia and Paraguay. The film's primary aim was to add to the debate surrounding climate change and the impact of wildfire on rural communities. It embraced a largely poetic and observational approach, and the unique perspective the Ayoreo community brought to the film offered audiences a fresh, nuanced insight in this global issue, including highlighting their lived experience, from engaging with regional officials to gathering water and playing games, all within the temporary shelter they rely on following the loss of the homes due to wildfire. While working with the community and through the Ayoreo language required an extended production process and close engagement with translation, it is something that documentary filmmaking methods can offer.

After a Fire found its audience across festivals and independent cinemas, particularly in Bolivia, and more widely in South America. When accompanied by engagement with the filmmaker, or with the wider project it was developed within, there was a great opportunity to highlight the experiences of the language community at its centre. While such a positive public release is always pleasing, the nature of attending a physical cinema, and especially film festivals, does create an audience that often doesn't need convincing of the argument of the film. Given today's saturated cinema and media landscape, if they have purchased a ticket, or even simply found the time to attend a screening, it is unlikely they would not already be interested and engaged with the themes and issues of the film. However, when a film does find a way to be screened to audiences who may not otherwise see it, or especially audiences who have the power to foster change in relation to the issues highlighted in the film, the medium's unique combination of the storytelling, emotional engagement, and the indexicality to the real does provide an opportunity to create genuine impact, and wider social change. And I would suggest this is where the medium's potential for contributing to wider language preservation projects can be significant.⁸

Given the role of policy and political will in supporting speaker communities in the revitalisation and preservation of their languages, as seen in the turning around the health of marginalised languages in places such as Cymru–Wales or Aotearoa–New Zealand, I suggest there is also great potential for a documentary film to also inform and support these wider language preservation campaigns. Impact-focused releases, or even one-off changemaker screenings also benefit from cinematic documentary's flexibility to engage with both political audiences and their constituents simultaneously.

Further to the previously mentioned African impact release of *Colours of the Alphabet*, during the film's earlier Zambian cinema release we were able to host targeted screenings and extend invitations to educational policy makers in Lusaka. While these screenings lacked the larger campaign structure of the later African release, they proved vital to engaging policymakers with the wider work that was underway in the country to increase the provision of local language education.⁹ We also saw this ability of a documentary film, both feature-length and short, to insert itself into wider language debates and campaigns, with a Scottish Gaelic short documentary film we made in the development of *Iorram*, called *Muir ar n-athraichean* (*Our Fathers' Sea*). The film also highlighted the important potential synergy between academia and documentary film within impact work. While it was able to find an audience on the Gaelic medium channel BBC Alba, as well as festival and online screenings, the main objective of its production was to position it within a wider project aimed at fostering change in Scottish inshore fishing policy, particularly in relation to the introduction of the consideration of the effect on the Scottish Gaelic language that any future marine policy changes may have. Having the film screen to changemakers in the Scottish Government, and be presented alongside traditional academic policy reports and recommendations, detailing the fundamental and unique role fishing plays in the transmission and maintenance of the Scottish Gaelic language, utilised the strategic capacity of film to work alongside other material to engage policymakers.

DSJ: *How does your position as a filmmaker in UK academia influence the way in which you deal with languages in your documentaries? For example, is the decline in modern languages at UK universities symptomatic of further difficulties in justifying such projects, or does the multilingual nature of national (UK) and multinational academic networks create a safe and receptive environment for that kind of practice research?*

AC: I have been fortunate to have been able to make a lot of my documentary films while working within UK academia, with my documentaries having a dual role as pieces of practice-based research as well as films for a broader non-academic audience. While it comes with challenges to ensure work accomplishes the needs of both audiences, it also offers the potential for working alongside a wide variety of academic colleagues and students, and benefits from the synergies that exist between the documentary industry and academia, especially within impact and engagement. My major film-based research projects have had their interdisciplinary links to fields such as linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, education, and wider regional language specialisations within African and Scottish studies – so, a distinct social science connection. While valuable intellectually for the project, these links have also increasingly been needed to justify and position projects for academic funders. This need for increasing collaboration with colleagues from across the academy, and the need for positioning film outputs alongside more traditional or impact-driven outputs has become part of the funding landscape in the UK, which can potentially add to, or arguably side-track, a film-based project if not carefully managed. Having my research focus on themes surrounding language and society has continued to generate positive feedback from funders, but undoubtedly this need to have a broader transdisciplinary research context, and team, has become increasingly important to secure academic funding support. However, I suspect this is not unique to language – or documentary film-based – research.

While my own work has had less direct engagement with traditional modern languages subjects (outside of translation and film studies), the cuts seen in these departments in the UK are distressing for all academics. They are also arguably part of a wider ideological shift away from encouraging advanced language learning and the valuing of multilingualism more broadly. In a context like the UK where the decline in language learning has been evidenced at secondary (Broady, 2020) and university level (British Academy & UCML, 2022), these cuts highlight an ongoing shift towards a monolingual educational context. Given this is on top of the previous under-representation of non-European or Chinese language teaching in the UK (British Academy & UCML, 2022), it offers a troubling picture for language opportunities for future students, and suggests a sad continuation of Anglocentrism and a lack of embracing the social value of multilingualism in the UK. This, at a time, that the digitalisation of the world has permitted far greater opportunity for collaboration with, and learning from, language communities of every region and size. It is this increasing potential for more collaborative and impact-generating research and film projects, created alongside diverse colleagues and language communities, that continues to drive my own research plans.

Endnotes

- 1 This context was fortunately provided through several interviews with elders in the community, and helped us to prepare the audience in the first quarter of the film. See Cole (2019a) for a more detailed exploration of the editing of the film, and Cole (2016) and (2019b) for wider contextual background on the project.
- 2 In a previous short documentary I made, *Do You Really Love Me?*, which had 11 languages in the film, but largely only one language spoken on screen for any long period, we utilised language tags in the subtitles to indicate these changes. We tried this method for *Colours of the Alphabet*, but due to both the frequent changes of language onscreen and the audience not being previously aware of the names of the languages spoken, test audiences didn't respond well to them.
- 3 There is also an important, somewhat separate issue surrounding the risks of poor subtitling of a documentary film for final audiences which, for a documentary film, also carries with it ethical implications surrounding the potential misrepresentation of those being filmed.
- 4 Due to the COVID crisis, and fixed broadcast schedules for the film, *Iorram*'s UK cinema release date coincided with the period when in-person screenings were not possible in the UK, and while 50 independent cinemas were releasing the film, they first had this on their TVOD (Ticketed Video on Demand) systems which permitted extensive multilingual options. The film was released with subtitle options of English, Spanish, Italian, German, French, Gaelic Captions, and English Captions, as well as English and Gaelic AD versions. More about the release of *Iorram (Boat Song)* is available at www.iorramfilm.com.
- 5 You can see more about the international impact project of *Colours of the Alphabet* through the impact report *When Your Tongue Is Not Your Own* (Cole & Higgins, 2019)
- 6 The importance of traditional ecological knowledge within Scottish Gaelic, especially in relation to marine protection and climate change, is discussed in Cole & Course (2021).
- 7 You can see more about the wider project at Cole *et al.* (2023) and www.playingwithwildfire.com.
- 8 Releases such as *Nae Pasaran* (2018), led by impact producer Cosmic Cat Films; *The Oil Machine* (2022), led by Film & Campaign; and *The Territory* (2023), by Think-Film, provide recent examples of theatrical documentary films leading impact campaigns more broadly, and highlight their capacity to play a role in changing policy and public opinion.
- 9 The film was launched at the Lusaka International Film Festival, and followed by cinema runs and screenings in Lusaka, Ndola, and Livingstone. In Lusaka, especially, we were able to leverage the media the film garnered, and invite members of the Zambian Ministry of Education to view and engage with the film and its characters. This also led the film being utilised by wider campaigns and research being undertaken in the country about the need to delay English-medium education and support curriculum development in local languages.

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