

Concepts for the Study of Culture

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Jürgen Trabant

Theses on the Future of Language

The situation: The loquacious species chats without interruption. The modern media have led to an explosion of linguistic activities, spoken and written. Silence and moments without linguistic activity have nearly disappeared from our lives. There seems to be no danger for the future of language.

However: Language is endangered with regard to languages (*langues*) (thesis 1) as well as to language (*langage*) or the linguisticity of the species (thesis 2). And there is no hope for overcoming these dangers (thesis 3).

Thesis 1: Mankind talks and writes, but in fewer and fewer and lesser languages (*langues*). Modernization decreases the number of languages and globalization lowers the status of the remaining ones.

Thesis 1.1: The death – or better: abandonment – of many languages is inevitable. According to serious predictions, only 600 from the still existing 6000 languages will survive by the end of the century.

Why we should care: Languages are not only communicative devices but – and this is specifically human – they are primarily techniques of thought production: "Language is the formative organ of thought," "Die Sprache ist das bildende Organ des Gedanken." (Humboldt 1903–1936, Vol. VII, 53) Modern linguistic insights have refuted the classical (and trivial) Aristotelian conviction that human thought is universally the same and that languages are only materially different, arbitrary sign systems for the communication of that universal thought. Since Humboldt, at least, we know that languages do not only "represent" thought, but that they "produce" thought, or, as Humboldt puts it, that they "discover the truth:"

It is self-evident from the mutual interdependence of thought and word that languages are not so much means for *representing* the truth already recognized but rather for *discovering* the truth previously unknown. (Humboldt 1903–1936, Vol. IV, 27)

And since there is not only one language and since language manifests itself in the plurality of languages, human thought is produced as a plethora of different semantic ensembles, hence:

Their diversity is not one of sounds and signs but a diversity of *world views*. (Humboldt, Vol. IV, 27)

From the point of view of communication this fact makes the plurality of languages a still deeper obstacle to communication, but from the point of view of cognition the different world views are a cognitive wealth. If now thousands of languages disappear, thousands of ways of conceiving the world will disappear. This is a loss of cognitive possibilities, one that, according to David Crystal, causes profound grief:

Language death is a terrible loss, to all who come into contact with it. Facing the loss of language or culture involves the same stages of grief that one experiences in the process of death and dying. (Crystal 2000, 163)

Thesis 1.2: Since 600 languages will survive, the “big” languages (national languages) will not disappear. But they will be degraded to vernacular languages in the process of globalization. One High Global Language will exclusively be used for the superior discourses.

Why we should care (I am considering the European case only): In medieval times, Latin was the language of higher discourse (with the exception of poetry) and of distant communication (*Distanzsprache*) and the languages of the people (*vulgare*) were the languages of lower, everyday speech and of proximity (*Nähe-sprache*). In a process that lasted from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the European vulgar languages have risen to “high languages,” substituting thus the medieval diglossia Latin-High/Vulgare-Low. This ascension to the height of Latin proved that the vulgar languages were not inferior but as good as Latin. The European nations took enormous pride in the heightening of the *status* of their languages and in the *ausbau* of the languages (their structural and lexical adaptation to all discursive needs) that accompanied the rise of the languages to prestige and cultural splendor. The enthusiastic appropriation of their languages was at the same time an outburst of unprecedented scientific and cultural creativity. The creative “explosion” of the European cultures was undoubtedly linked to the rising of the vulgar languages to “high languages.”

Globalization now re-establishes a language regime comparable to the medieval diglossic situation – and with “medieval” socio-political effects: Global English is the high language for the high discourses, all other languages are low languages (vernacular) for everyday communication. The *status* of the languages goes down, their *ausbau* is stopped or reduced (e.g. there will be no new German words for new scientific inventions). The emergence of an English speaking aristocracy on top of the nations deepens dramatically the social division of the European societies, destroying old national cohesions and solidarities and hampering new solidarities yet to arise (why should migrants learn the “low” national lan-

guage?). It condemns the old cultures to oblivion or folklore at best (as can be seen in former colonial processes).

If then, at the end of that process, the old languages disappear eventually, cf. 1.1. for the consequences.

Thesis 2: The loquacious species chats without interruption. The modern media have led to an explosion of linguistic activities, spoken and written. There seems to be no danger for the future of language (*langage*). There are however some indicators that, due to the recent media revolution on the one side and due to societal changes on the other side, humankind transforms its cognitive system and hence its linguisticity.

Thesis 2.1: New media: The revolutionary psychodynamic changes produced by the transition from orality to literacy have been described by Walter Ong (1982). We do not yet know very well what the post-scriptural new media revolution we are living through does to our brains, souls and societies.

We do not yet know what the ubiquity and continuous presence of images and music does to our brains. To old professors from the Gutenberg Galaxy it seems to weaken e.g. the capacity of our students to structure texts, i.e. linear written compositions and sequential argumentations. We do not yet know how the never-ending verbal production affects our social systems (e.g. the ubiquitous and eternal parental presence through mobile phones, the explosion of mobbing through net anonymity, the disappearance of shame and privacy). The completely new systematic position of language in the new mediatic surroundings cannot be without consequences to our linguisticity.

Thesis 2.2: Societal changes: Dynamic processes in modern societies seem to split up the two dimensions of the linguistic activity into an unarticulated bodily communicative behavior (Bühler’s: “expression” and “appeal”) on the one side and a precise scientific or practical designation of objects (Bühler’s “representation”) on the other. (Bühler 1934/1999, 28)

“Normal” and complete speech (in the old times) implies a speaker and a hearer and an articulated linguistic utterance conveying some information on the world. In her linguistic activity the speaker, in her “representation” of the world (or Humboldtian: in her “formation of thought”), “expresses” herself and “appeals” to the hearer (who in his turn becomes the expressing, appealing and representing speaker). The speech event is “symptom,” “signal” and “sign” *at the same time*. The pragmatic (or communicative) and the semantic (or cognitive) dimen-

sion go together in normal speech. Now, my French colleague Merlin-Kajman (2003) observes – at the margins of our societies – the appearance of a communicative behavior that eliminates the representational dimension of verbal language and therefore also articulation. The gregarious communication of young men relies on touching, tattoos, spitting, inarticulate sounds, a kind of exaggeration of Bourdieu's "gueule" and the proletarian *hexis*. (Bourdieu 2001, 127 f.) The absence or weakening of the presentational dimension (the specifically human dimension of language) shifts language toward animal communication, toward symptoms and signals.

Two other French literary scholars, Judet de la Combe and Wismann (2004), criticize, on the contrary, the exaggeration of the representational dimension in the linguistic behavior in the modern world: The need of objective designation in the scientific, technological and commercial world eliminates the expressive and the appellative dimensions of language and transforms language into signs. The essentially communicative and cognitive human linguistic animal is transformed into a cold and rational sign-producing designation machine.

Even if these scenarios seem somewhat exaggerated, the dynamics of modern societies favor this splitting up of language into its two dimensions, into a non-rational "cry of passion" and "langage d'action," known to Condillac (1746/1973, 195) as the wild beginning of language, and into an objective designation that lies beyond language – so to say at its end – as its scientific refinement. That scission, caused by social exclusion on the one side and technological sophistication on the other side, clearly jeopardizes the very nature of language, its human synthesis of expression, appeal and representation.

Thesis 3: There is no hope for language. Language has only few defenders and lovers.

Why is this so? Language has two handicaps: diversity and vagueness (variation).

- a) Language manifests itself in different languages (the communicative problem).
- b) Language is vague and not precise (the cognitive problem).

Diversity and vagueness are the basis of a persistent critical attitude towards language throughout the intellectual history of the West.

Thesis 3.1: Europe fights against language from the very beginning:

- a) Against diversity: In the story of the Babel Tower the Bible presents diversity as a punishment, as an obstacle to global communication.

- b) Against vagueness, obscurity: From the very beginning of philosophy or scientific thought in Greece, language is criticized as a bad image of the world, hence as an obstacle to scientific knowledge. Plato – and with him the European philosophy as a whole – dreams of the absence of language as a condition of true knowledge.

Thesis 3.2: The animosity against language becomes ferocious when Europe realizes the depth of linguistic diversity. When through deeper insights into the languages of the world, the European language reflexion understands that languages are not only – as Aristotle thought – different sounds but different thoughts, modern science and scientific philosophy start a war against language, in 1620, with Bacon's *Novum Organum*, a war that is still going on in modern analytical philosophy since Frege in the 1890s. Diversity and vagueness (obscurity) are the linguistic enemies of philosophy. Hence one global language and well defined "signs" are the remedies to those linguistic diseases.

Thesis 3.3: There are however a few thinkers who think of language diversity as a cognitive wealth and who know that vagueness and obscurity of language is a necessary condition of non-scientific creative speech and, as such, a pre-condition of truth and science (Leibniz, Herder, Humboldt). Linguistics is based on that conviction since it is research into the "marvellous variety of the operations of the human mind." (Leibniz 1765/1966, 293) The positive evaluation of linguistic diversity and the "vague" semantics of language remains however a minority position in our civilization, the more so as it is contrary to the uniforming and rational tendencies of the globalized world.

Hence: Since there are only few and weak activities in favor of language in our world, more and more languages will disappear and the linguisticity of the human being is in danger. And since "the human being is human only through language," "Der Mensch ist nur Mensch durch Sprache" (Humboldt 1903–1936, Vol. IV, 15), it is the human being who is at stake here.

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Isabel Wünsche

Western Modernism at and beyond the Margins: František Kupka and Margaret Preston

Discussions about the intersection of modernism and the global in the field of art history generally recognize two approaches: one is “*World Art History*,” the other “*Global Art History*.” The first – if we accept that one can agree upon a definition of art at all – is relatively unambiguous in nature and all-inclusive; a work in this category might be included in any one of numerous and varied narratives, regardless of its context, geographical origin, or reception. (Summers 2003; Onians 2004; Zijlmans/Damme 2008) Practically speaking, the study of World Art History as pursued institutionally tends to break things down geographically by continent, thus promoting geographically based collaborations between specialists for Europe, the Near East and/or Asia, Africa, North America, Latin and South America, Australia and Oceania, and possibly other geographical and cultural subdivisions.¹

Global Art History is perhaps a less inclusive approach, but having originated in a twenty-first century context, it takes better account of present-day considerations of “the nexus between the logic of global circulation of contemporary art and the recourse artists seek to the local as a space of authenticity and nostalgia.” (Juneja 2011, 277) Arguments for and against the notion of a global art history were first raised by James Elkins in a seminar among art historians and critics on the subject of the practice and responsibility of global thinking within the discipline. (Elkins 2006)

Naturally, the question arises as to who or what is to be considered “global” – the artist (as “a global player”), the subject, or the medium? Is the reception of the work global, and if so, for whom is it really accessible and within what sort of institutional and/or cultural framework? Or perhaps the question should be “for whom is it *not* accessible,” since we tend to forget that much of the world’s population lacks access to sufficient supplies of food and clean water, not to mention education, the World Wide Web, or an art gallery.

¹ See for example: the School of Art History and World Art Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK and the Programme in Art of the Contemporary World and World Art Studies, Universiteit Leiden, Netherlands.