

VANISHING WORLDVIEWS

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ABSTRACT

In Humboldt's philosophy, language is the 'formative organ of thought', its function primarily cognitive. The formation of thought is a common activity of 'I and Thou'. The languages thus produced contain different worldviews. This conception of languages as precious creations of the human mind contrasts with the fatal conception of languages as arbitrary communicative devices. The quasi-Humboldtian appreciation of its languages by the European Union collides with the activities of politicians for a globalized linguistic regime and the massive propaganda of social scientists for a global monolingual situation. The political task of the future, inspired by Humboldt's philosophy of language, will be to work for a coexistence of the languages of the world with the invasive Global Language.

Keywords: language and cognition; language policy; plurilingualism; global English; worldviews; diversity; European Union and its languages

THE LATE FRENCH POET and linguist Henri Meschonnic recommended to disciplines dealing with language that they 'think Humboldt today' ('penser Humboldt aujourd'hui').¹ What did he mean, and why should we think Humboldt today? Meschonnic referred mainly to Humboldt's conception of language as activity, as *energeia*:

Die *Sprache*, in ihrem wirklichen Wesen aufgefaßt, ist etwas beständig und in jedem Augenblick *Vorübergehendes*. [...] Sie selbst ist kein Werk (*Ergon*), sondern eine Thätigkeit (*Energeia*). Ihre wahre Definition kann daher nur eine genetische sein. Sie ist nämlich die sich ewig wiederholende *Arbeit des Geistes*, den *articulierten Laut* zum Ausdruck des *Gedanken* fähig zu machen. (GS VII: 45–46)²

[Language regarded in its real nature is permanently and at every moment a transitory thing. [...] In itself it is no product (*ergon*), but an activity (*energeia*). Its true definition can therefore only be a genetic one. For it is the ever-repeated work of the spirit of making the articulated sound capable of expressing thought. (Heath 49)]³

The conclusion of this most famous passage for linguistics was hence:

Nur sie [die verbundene Rede] muss man sich überhaupt in allen Untersuchungen, welche in die lebendige Wesenheit der Sprache eindringen sollen, immer als das Wahre und Erste denken. (GS VII: 46)

[It alone [connected discourse] must in general always be thought as the true and the primary in all investigations which are to penetrate into the living essentiality of language. (Heath 49)]

It was Meschonnic's vocation to recall to the Parisian linguistic scene of his time a few Humboldtian truths, namely: that the very core of linguistics is 'der sprechende Mensch', the talking human person, not the structures; that the structures of languages are only 'das todte Gerippe', the dead skeleton of language; that, as creative *energeia* of sound and thought, language is not primarily sign but rhythm; that linguistic theory is at the same time theory of society and history. The last of these points reminds us of the fact that Humboldt, before he became a linguist, was a political theoretician and statesman. Humboldt's life and work focus on the double Aristotelian definition of the human being as *zoon politikon* and *zoon logon echon*. In a brilliant recent article, Donatella Di Cesare has shown the profound structural identity of the political and the linguistic in Humboldt.⁴

I will not consider the 'energetic' aspects of Humboldt's linguistic philosophy once more which are so passionately echoed in Meschonnic's work, but rather extend Meschonnic's 'penser Humboldt aujourd'hui' to the problem of language policy. 'Penser Humboldt' is of the utmost urgency in the language politics in Europe (and the world) today, 'aujourd'hui'! My focus on Humboldt will therefore shift from the *energeia* to another famous Humboldtian key word: to *Weltansichten*, 'worldviews'.

1 *Generating worldviews*

In his main work *Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, Humboldt sums up his philosophy of language. It is the introduction to a work on the Austronesian languages, especially on Kavi, the old language of Java.⁵ The first volume of this work studies the cultural relations between India and Java. Humboldt's philosophy of language is developed in the context of a study of particular languages, and the languages are treated as part of a culture and a history. The Humboldtian language philosophy is not – as philosophy of language was from the very beginning – situated in the context of a theory of knowledge, but in the perspective of the linguistic description of *languages*. It asks why it is philosophically necessary to deal with languages; it does not try to determine the conditions of the truth of a sentence. The short and overall answer to that question is: because languages are the ways the human mind produces thought – *die Arbeit des Geistes* [the work of the spirit] – and because we want to know how this is done. Humboldt hereby takes up the task attributed by Leibniz to the study of languages: we have to 'put all the languages of the world into dictionaries and grammars' because we thereby grasp the 'wonderful variety of the operations of the human mind'.⁶

From the very beginning, Humboldt's linguistic philosophy is directed against the traditional Aristotelian conception of the word as an arbitrary sign. In an early linguistic text, he denounces this erroneous conception.⁷ Aristotle's *De interpretatione* had decreed for centuries that – first – thought is universally the same and generated without language and – second – that words are means for the communication of these thoughts, vocal sounds (*ta en te phone*) that are signs (*semeia*).⁸

According to Humboldt, this semiotic conception of language is completely wrong: there is no such separation of cognition and communication, and everything is much more complicated. The work of the spirit can be sketched in three steps.

1.1 The first element of Humboldt's linguistic philosophy: language is thought – 'das bildende Organ des Gedanken' (GS VII: 53) [the formative organ of thought]. Language is not something that comes *after* thinking, but is the production of thought itself. It is not simply a means to designate *post festum* what has been thought, but is the discovery itself of that truth:

Durch die gegenseitige Abhängigkeit des Gedankens und des Wortes von einander leuchtet es klar ein, daß die Sprachen nicht eigentlich Mittel sind, die schon erkannte Wahrheit darzustellen, sondern weit mehr, die vorher unerkannte [Wahrheit] zu entdecken. (GS IV: 27)

[It is self-evident from the mutual interdependence of thought and word that languages are not so much the means to represent the pre-recognized truth as the means to discover the truth previously unknown.]⁹

Humboldt describes this 'discovery of truth', this 'labour of the spirit', in Kantian terms. Sensibility and intellect interact in the formation of thought, they form a 'schema', a rather mysterious entity in Kant's system, which Humboldt clarifies: the schema is thought *as* vocal sound. This is important: the voice does not come *after* the mental event, but voice and concept together are thought in a synthetic unity. Thought is *embodied*.¹⁰ But embodiment is not yet the whole complicated process of thought formation. The synthetic sound-thought is not only uttered but also *heard* by the speaker-thinker, it is immediately self-reflexive, and this acoustic self-control of the vocal production is the necessary condition of the symbolic nature of the word:

Denn indem in ihr [der Sprache] das geistige Streben sich Bahn durch die Lippen bricht, kehrt das Erzeugniß desselben zum eignen Ohre zurück. [...] und ohne diese, wo Sprache mitwirkt, auch stillschweigend immer vorgehende Versetzung in zum Subject zurückkehrende Objectivität ist die Bildung des Begriffs, mithin alles wahre Denken, unmöglich. (GS VII: 55)

[For in that the mental striving breaks out through the lips in language, the product of that striving returns back to the speaker's ear. [...] [A]nd without this transformation, into an objectivity that returns to the subject, the act of concept-formation, and with it all true thinking, is impossible. (Heath 56)]

1.2 Alongside the vocal (and acoustic) embodiment of thought, Humboldt points out a second crucial element of the concept-formation: I and Thou, the *political* element. Humans do not think in solitude: they are always in *polis*, in community. They need the Other in order to think. In his very first article on language, Humboldt coined the beautiful German word *Mitdenken* to designate this fundamental function of language: 'co-cogitation' (GS VII: 583). The term unites the cognitive (*Denken*) and the political (*Mit*) essence of language. The vocal concept, heard by the

speaker, has to be heard and processed by You, and You have to re-produce my word. Only now is the concept-formation completed:

In der Erscheinung entwickelt sich jedoch die Sprache nur *gesellschaftlich*, und der Mensch versteht sich selbst nur, indem er die Verstehbarkeit seiner Worte an Andren versuchend geprüft hat. Denn die Objectivität wird gesteigert, wenn das selbstgebildete Wort aus fremdem Munde wiedertönt. (GS VII: 55–56)

[In appearance, however, language develops only *socially*, and man understands himself only once he has tested the intelligibility of his words by trial upon others. For objectivity is heightened if the self-coined word is echoed from a stranger's mouth. (Heath 56)]

The interaction with the Thou is not only 'communication', i.e. a transfer of 'information', of a content formed by the speaker alone, to the other. The Other is an essential condition of the possibility of thought itself, of *my* thought:

Schon das Denken ist wesentlich von Neigung zu gesellschaftlichem Daseyn begleitet, und der Mensch sehnt sich, abgesehen von allen körperlichen und Empfindungsbeziehungen, auch zum Behuf seines bloßen Denkens, nach einem dem *Ich* entsprechenden *Du*; der Begriff scheint ihm erst seine Bestimmtheit und Gewißheit durch das Zurückstrahlen aus einer fremden Denkkraft zu erreichen. (GS VI: 26)

[Thought itself is accompanied essentially by the inclination to social existence, and, quite apart from any physical or emotional relationships, man longs for a *thou* to correspond to his *I* simply for the purpose of thinking, and a given concept appears to acquire its definiteness and certainty from being reflected in someone else's intellect. (Humboldt 1997: 132)]

Thought is not only embodied, it is also essentially 'political'. The work of the spirit, the formation of thought is a common labour. I and Thou form the concept together.

1.3 That formation of thought is a universal process in all humans, but the political dimension generates a third crucial quality: *diversity*. The common formation of the word takes place in the sphere of individual languages. The *Mitdenken* does not create concepts each time *ex nihilo* but uses concept-sounds already available (which, of course, the *energeia* has to create each time completely anew). Therefore the formation of thought depends on individual languages:

Das Denken ist aber nicht bloß abhängig von der Sprache überhaupt, sondern bis auf einen gewissen Grad, auch von jeder einzelnen bestimmten. (GS IV: 21)

[Thought, however, is not only dependent on language in general but also to a certain extent on each individual language. (Humboldt 1997: 15)]

Individual languages influence thought, 'to a certain extent'. The little phrase 'bis auf einen gewissen Grad' is crucial: it marks the difference between linguistic relativism (Whorf) and Humboldt. Individual languages and thought are not completely identical. However, different languages yield different modes of thinking, or – to use Humboldt's famous word – different worldviews:

Ihre Verschiedenheit ist nicht eine von Schällen und Zeichen, sondern eine Verschiedenheit der Weltansichten selbst. (GS IV: 27)

[Their diversity is not one of sounds and signs but a diversity of worldviews.]

This is the politically decisive sentence. Since this is so, since languages are *Weltansichten*, since they are manifestations of human thought, they are precious creations of the human mind. Humboldt is adamant about this: languages are not obstacles to communication, but are the wealth of the human mind, the intellectual history of mankind:

Durch die Mannigfaltigkeit der Sprachen wächst unmittelbar für uns der Reichthum der Welt und die Mannigfaltigkeit dessen, was wir in ihr erkennen; es erweitert sich zugleich dadurch für uns der Umfang des Menschendaseyns, und neue Arten zu denken und empfinden stehen in bestimmten und wirklichen Charakteren vor uns da. (GS VII: 602)

[Through the variety of the languages, immediately the richness of the world grows for us as well as the variety of what we discover in the world; at the same time the scope of human existence is enlarged, and new ways of thinking and feeling are presented to us in definite real characters.]

1.4 The political consequences of the conception of language as ‘work of the spirit’ and of languages as ‘worldviews’ are obvious. ‘Penser Humboldt aujourd’hui’ means, as in Humboldt’s times, fighting the Aristotelian conception of language as a means of information transfer and of languages as vocal signs. This trivial view of language has not at all, as Humboldt thought in 1811, ‘längst verschwunden’ [disappeared long ago]; it remains the model of language most prevalent amongst scholars and laypeople alike. Humboldt knew that this model is lethal to language: ‘Diese falsche Ansicht tödtet allen Geist’ (GS III: 167). Of course, it eliminates the cognitive importance of language and thereby does not allow to see what language is and what languages are: not sounds and signs, but ‘worldviews’. ‘Penser Humboldt aujourd’hui’ means to create a cultural and political atmosphere that does not endanger the plurality and variety of languages. It first means to recognize the fundamental politico-cognitive function of language (*Mitdenken*), and to recognize the *Weltansichten* of that work of the spirit – and hence to care for language. If languages produce the ‘Reichthum der Welt’ [richness of the world], plurilingualism in its double sense has to be fostered: societal plurilingualism (the maintenance of the many languages) on the one hand, as well as individual plurilingualism (the knowledge of more than one language) on the other. Humboldt himself was, of course, not an enemy of a general or global language. As a member of the enlightenment European intelligentsia, he had perfect command of French, the global language of his time, which he used in many ways, as a diplomat, as a scientist writing for an international public, and as a brother writing letters to his very French and very cool brother. But he was also attached to his native German which allowed him to think a sometimes complicated philosophy of language; he admired and loved Greek, and he was attached to Italian which the family spoke at home in Rome, and after Rome back in Tegel. And he thought that the study of languages, the ‘vergleichendes Sprachstudium’, was a great pedagogical tool for the formation of a language culture.

2 *European languages and Globalese*

2.1 *Europe's rich linguistic diversity*

What is the European language situation of today from the standpoint of Humboldt's conception of language as work of the spirit and of languages as world-views? Europe is a continent with many languages, and the European Union seems to be a rather Humboldtian political body: it recognizes the languages as precious elements of the personality of the European nations. The EU has twenty-four official languages, and its constitutional texts require the protection of these languages. Hence, it maintains the most expensive language service in the world. The official documents generated in Brussels, mostly in English or – less and less frequently – in French, must be translated into all the languages of the Union. The members of the European Parliament can use their national languages, and their speeches are translated into the other European languages. European citizens can communicate with Brussels in their different languages. Europe once even had a Commissioner for Multilingualism. And the official European language education policy is M + 2, mother tongue plus two European languages. The EU does not pursue a Jacobin politics of linguistic uniformity – one Republic, one language – but fosters a plurilingual linguistic regime.

Respect of the languages seems to be a common European conviction. The European constitutional texts refer very positively to cultural and linguistic variety:

It [the Union] shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and shall ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced. (Treaty of Lisbon 2007, Article 2 (3))¹¹

Linguistic diversity is considered something precious, and as something to be protected and developed. No further reasons are given for this appreciation of the cultural and linguistic wealth. There is no mention, as far as I can see, of *Weltansichten*, of 'worldviews', of precious cognitive structures of the languages. Cultural and linguistic diversity seems to be of great value from the outset without any further legitimation. Sometimes reference is made to 'identity' that has to be protected. 'Languages define personal identities, but are also part of a shared inheritance,' said Leonard Orban, then Commissioner for Multilingualism, way back in 2008.¹² The European Union should perhaps give this some further thought.

2.2 *Towards a common language: Globalese*

But, notwithstanding the official plurilingual politics of the European Union, there is a strong and powerful movement *against* the plurality of languages in Europe. The plurality of languages is, of course, a terrible obstacle to efficient communication, an obstacle to the smooth functioning of the community. Thus, the social engineers that organize and shape the European Union are not particularly in favour of linguistic diversity. The French tradition of political uniformity is very strong in Brussels. France succeeded over a period of about fifty years of schooling and linguistic immersion in spreading French as the common language of the Republic

and thereby reducing all other languages of the country to insignificance or disappearance. The French Republic is the historical model for the efficient linguistic unification of a plurilingual political body. Hence, the European Union does not really believe in its plurilingual future. Monolingualism is practical and spreading: English is increasingly becoming the only language of bureaucracy in Brussels and Luxemburg. The linguistic service does not function as it should: laws are sent to national parliaments in English, without translation in the national language. Brussels seems to presume that everybody now understands English.¹³ There is no Commissioner for languages anymore.

And, beyond Brussels, another European development is stronger than anything else: Europeans themselves adopt English as their common language. There is a tsunami-like increase of English speakers in the European Union.¹⁴ In the Northern countries nearly everybody speaks English, and the younger generations of the South learn English. The motivation for the learning of English, however, is not a curiosity for English-speaking countries, or the wish to become good Europeans (as compared to the motivation of the citizens of the French Republic who wanted to become French by learning French), but to have a *global* means of communication. The language learnt is Globalese, not European or English.

The member states of the European Union deliberately act against the European spirit of plurilingualism: Germany, for instance, clearly promotes the teaching of English (and not the teaching of Polish, Danish, Dutch, French, Italian, Hungarian, Czech, Slovenian or Slovak, to name just the neighbours of the German language), because the industrial and commercial world went global. In Germany, Big Business switched to English long ago: the language of the Siemens office in Munich is English. For the recruitment of a globalized workforce, the powerful German economy established a private English-speaking school system: from the Kindergarten to the MBA (because this is what you want for your kids), you can educate your children in English. And parents, neurotically stressed by the necessity of social climbing, enlist their children in these so-called 'international' schools, where the adjective 'international' always means 'Anglophone'. The State, under pressure from globalization agents and more neurotic parents, obliges its schools to become more and more Anglophone wherever possible: there are so called 'bilingual' classes in every ambitious school where important matters (sciences, social sciences) are taught in English in so-called *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL), i.e. in linguistic immersion courses. Universities feel the obligation (created by the State and by themselves) to establish more and more Anglophone curricula. And, generally speaking, the 'superior' fields of discourse abandon German and switch to English: the sciences started publishing in English right after the war (of course, nobody wanted to read, write and speak the Nazi language); the social sciences followed; and any ambitious cultural 'event' today has an English title – up to such absurdities as *The Botticelli Renaissance* (the title of a recent exhibition at the *Gemäldegalerie* Berlin) where the English article 'the' stands for the international appeal (and perhaps because the German article 'die' would mislead the public: *Die Botticelli Renaissance* – who dies here?).

But aren't these great developments? A whole nation becomes bilingual, a country becomes international, it connects with Europe, it opens itself to the World, finally, like the Dutch and the Scandinavians did decades ago. Yes, of course, this is just wonderful. However, there are some drawbacks for the language and for the language community.

Drawback for the language: one of the most important cultural transformations in Europe was the linguistic revolution that started in the sixteenth century and was completed around 1750/1800: the rise of the languages of the people (*vulgaria*) into High Culture. In medieval times, all the higher discourses (with the interesting exception of literature) were in Latin: the King, the Church, the Law, the University spoke and wrote Latin. Latin was the High Language of Europe, and the languages of the people were 'vernacular' languages, oral languages for the vicinity of daily life, 'low' languages. Then, these 'vulgar' languages of Europe rose to the height of Latin: the King, the Church, the new sciences, eventually even Philosophy switched to the vulgar languages. They became as high as Latin. This cultural ascension and extension led to a lexical and grammatical enrichment of these languages, the so-called *Ausbau*. Thus, these languages became the pride of the language communities: they proved as good as Latin; the prestige or the *status* of these languages was heightened; they were real languages of culture. The educated classes of the modern European nations proudly used and cared for their national languages.

Now, today, through the linguistic changes just sketched – elimination of the vulgar languages in the higher discourses, appropriation of a language 'higher' than one's own old language – the status is lowered and the *Ausbau* of these languages is continuously diminished. There is for instance no need to have a 'vulgar' language of biology any more, since biology is now done in English. The consequences of these changes are immediately felt: all observers of the developments of the German language agree on the decline of 'language culture' in the German language community: schools do not really attend to the Norm any more, their attitude is increasingly *laissez-faire*, the press lowers and simplifies its style etc. Why bother with a language that has no high status in the community any more, that is just a 'vernacular', a language of the house (or the house slaves; *vema* in Latin were the slaves born in the household of the Master)?

Drawbacks for the society: actually, the wonderful bilingual and globalized milieu is still largely restricted to those who are able to pay for the expensive international and bilingual education. It is evident that in Germany a new aristocracy is gradually distancing itself linguistically from the lower classes of the nation: people whose working language is global English, plus people who (like myself) go to English-language films, attend events like *The Botticelli Renaissance*, listen to American professors coming to preach to the savages on the margins of the Empire, try (in vain) to write witty papers in English etc. The country is approaching the socio-cultural situation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when, after the complete destruction of Germany in the first Thirty Years' War and the cultural depression that followed, the German elites emigrated into French culture and language. The lower classes stayed behind, with German as a low and vernacular language. Such a situation is

bad for the cohesion of a nation and very bad for a democratic nation. The new secession starts from above, but it also erodes the community from beneath: why should immigrants learn German? If they intend to integrate, they want to learn the High Language of their new country, the language of professional success, and this seems to be English, since the elites of this country use this language in their banks and businesses and universities. Why bother with German? The immigrants do not need another vernacular language, they already have one. Recent linguistic events apparently confirm this linguistic disintegration: the new citizens of this country were welcomed by the (moral) elites in their High Language, in English, not in German: 'Refugees welcome'. Secession from above, non-integration from below.

2.3 *'Mehrsprachigkeit' and linguistic justice*

Now, this not so innocent societal split was perhaps the reason why the President of the Federal Republic of Germany exhorted his fellow citizens to learn more English: he stipulated 'Mehrsprachigkeit für alle' ('plurilinguism for everybody') as meaning 'more English for everybody'.¹⁵ The logic is clear: if everybody speaks English, the social divide into an Anglophone elite and a Germanophone people will be overcome, the nation as a whole will speak English.

The term 'Mehrsprachigkeit' used in this way in political discourse for the propagation of English is a euphemism which promises linguistic happiness but hides a strictly limited linguistic policy. *Mehrsprachigkeit* has become – at least in the non-Anglophone countries – a social value as such, like 'health' or 'happiness'. Everybody craves *Mehrsprachigkeit*. However, in the presidential discourse, 'Mehrsprachigkeit' does not mean, 'Mehr-Sprachigkeit', (pluri-lingualism), i.e. the possession of more than one language, of any language. It just means bilingualism, and only a special one: Language X (e.g. German) + English.

This is also the message of a great book on 'plurilingualism in the united Europe': *Mehrsprachigkeit im vereinten Europa*.¹⁶ This sociological study celebrates the very widespread learning of English in Europe as the propagation of *Mehrsprachigkeit* or as the accumulation of linguistic 'capital' (its subtitle is: *Transnationales sprachliches Kapital als Ressource in einer globalisierten Welt*), as a condition for professional and personal success in the modern world. But it is clear that the social scientist learning – let us say – Italian or Polish does not accumulate any linguistic capital to speak of. If you are 'plurilingual' Polish/Italian, your linguistic capital is rather poor. Forget about your French-Dutch bilingualism or your Russian-German-Hungarian plurilingualism. The only language that accumulates linguistic capital is English. All bilingualisms or even plurilingualisms without English are worthless in this linguistic capitalism. And since the book does not contain a plea for English native speakers to become bi- or plurilingual (since native English speakers already have the capital the others have to accumulate), it is evident that it is not really about *Mehrsprachigkeit* but about the propagation of one common language for the Global Republic.

But the term *Mehrsprachigkeit* shamefully hides this result of the common European language learning: European or Global monolingualism. Another social scientist,

Philipp van Parijs, however, praises explicitly the propagation of one language for the Global Republic through the learning of English: *Linguistic Justice for Europe and the World*. His programme is rather socialist than capitalist (Marxists know that these two go together). It does not advocate the accumulation of linguistic capital but 'linguistic justice'.¹⁷ The condition for linguistic justice is one language all over the World.

Social scientists know that the globalization politics they are advocating leads to the decline and finally to the disappearance of other languages. But they are merciless: 'So what?' is their reaction. Nothing important is lacking if we have only one language on Earth. Languages are only materially different means of communication of information, i.e. arbitrary signs of Aristotelian brand, so nothing is lost if those superfluously different sounds disappear. On the contrary, no obstacles to communication anymore, 'linguistic justice' will reign on Earth: Paradise. According to van Parijs, in the monolingual world there will be a tiny little reminiscence of the 'ancestral languages' of the old plurilingual world – the accent:

A peculiar yet intelligible [...] accent might one day become just as good a marker of the linguistic dimension of one's collective identity as one's ancestral language, and the curse of Babel will then at long last be undone. (209)

Mourning 'language death'¹⁸ is linguistic sentimentalism.¹⁹

2.4 Backgrounds

Social scientists for the most part not only observe societal (here linguistic) changes but also propagate propositions for the good organization of society. The books mentioned massively promote a global English-speaking World. As if this were necessary. The economic pressures on Europe and the World are such that linguistic uniformity will spread without the active involvement of the social sciences.

But in those books there is an eagerness about the propagation of the Global Language that is supported by three very powerful tendencies and traditions.

First by a universalist linguistic theory. Social scientists tell us that languages have nothing to do with culture or with cognition and the 'wonderful variety of the operations of the human mind'. The sociologist refers to Chomskyan linguistics, whose prophet Steven Pinker declares all cognitive differences between languages to be non-existent: 'But it is wrong, all wrong.'²⁰ But just referring to an influential linguistic theory does not prove anything, all the less so since it has recently been challenged by other schools of cognitive linguistics that have come back to a rather Humboldtian linguistic theory.²¹

Second: the animosities of the social sciences can flourish because they are backed by a general animosity towards language in our culture. In both founding traditions of the West, language and languages are seen as obstacles. In the Bible, the plurality of languages is a punishment from God. In Paradise we had only one language; the many languages after Babel are an obstacle to universal communication. And in the Greek tradition, language is considered as an obstacle to truth, a cognitive obstacle. From Plato on, words are criticized as bad images. For

centuries, however, the old anti-linguistic passion of philosophy and theology was neutralized by Aristotle, who was the major reference point for Scholastic philosophy: words are only vocal signs for thought that has nothing to do with language. But he thereby degraded language to a trivial instrument of communication without any importance. With the rising of the languages of the people to the higher discourses, however, the philosophical critique of language becomes radical. Francis Bacon denounced the semantics of those languages as ‘idols of the market’, wrong ideas of the stupid people that have to be purged by the *doctores*.²²

There was only a short historic period in which the cultural and cognitive role of languages of the world was justly estimated: exactly two hundred years, from 1765 to 1965, from the publication of Leibniz’s *New Essays* to Chomsky’s *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*.²³ Leibniz recognized the cognitive importance of languages and celebrated their semantic variety as a wonderful wealth of the human mind. Two hundred years later, the celebration of the cognitive impact of languages and their ‘wonderful variety’ ends in Chomsky’s Universal Grammar and dissolves in the ‘surface’ of a formalistic and angelic language of Paradise. But the languages of Mankind are still existent and people enjoy the pleasures of their languages. Humboldt is the main theoretician of that joy of diversity and its political importance.

Third: the national states and their language policies are the models of the global language politics presented in those books from the social sciences. What they demand is not new. It is a prolongation of the linguistic policy of the Jacobins in the French Revolution, of one language for the Republic: ‘La République, une et indivisible, dans son territoire, dans son système politique, doit être une et indivisible dans son langage,’ claimed Urbain Domergue, the ‘grammairien patriote’, in 1794. And the means to reach this goal are also the same: monolingual education and total linguistic immersion from morning to night, from the cradle to the grave. All European nation states more or less emulated this Jacobin language regime: one language for the Republic. It is echoed in the neo-Jacobin propositions of the globalized social engineers.

3 *The global language and worldviews*

Therefore, it will be difficult to think Humboldt today. The dominant linguistic theory, Western thought, political traditions, Power in its many forms – as Economy, Science, Politics, capitalist or socialist – side with monolingualism and its destructive cultural dynamics. But this is exactly why we have to think Humboldt, today more than ever.

Humboldt develops a theory of language as cognition (‘das bildende Organ des Gedanken’), it is the common – hence political – creation of thought, and it is the common – and hence political – generation of different worldviews. The plurality of these cognitive creations – they are cathedrals of thought – is a cultural wealth that the global human society has to preserve if it wants to survive as mankind. Once, Humboldt compares languages to the Greek Gods who are individual manifestations of the Divine. They are individuals and they are divine. Their totality – not

one God only – is Divinity (GS IV: 33). The totality of the individual languages of the World is Language, is Human Thought.

However, the linguistic capital of the global language will spread, ‘linguistic justice’ will come, and this will certainly be an achievement for the functioning of a World Society. But if only one and the same language reigns, it will be as intolerant as the One God of our monotheistic religion. Therefore we have to see that the languages of the World, linguistic diversity, ‘die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues’, as well as the peoples who still speak these languages, do not become victims of that jealous God. The accumulation of linguistic capital as well as the propagation of linguistic justice has to cohabit with Humboldt’s linguistic ‘Reichthum der Welt und die Mannigfaltigkeit dessen, was wir in ihr erkennen’ (GS VII: 602), a quite different form of the wealth of nations. The solution is *Mehrsprachigkeit*, real *Mehrsprachigkeit*: the coexistence of many languages in the territory as well as the knowledge of many languages in the individual ‘sprechender Mensch’ [‘speaking human being’].

Hence, ‘penser Humboldt aujourd’hui’, applied to language politics, can only mean: fighting for the existence of the languages of the world, caring for their strong and healthy development, that is maintaining their *Ausbau* and their *status*, being proud of the wealth and beauty of one’s language, and, of course, learning as many languages as possible. Because every language discovers something new in the world.

And it means also: to learn a language just for the language, not because it is useful, communicative, good for your job, but just because you want to know how this language is constructed, how it sounds, and you want to read or hear what the people who speak that language have to say. This means also changing the didactics of foreign language learning.

Learning global English for global communication is a rather egoistic action: I learn it to make myself understood; I do not care so much about the ‘worldview’ of my partners, about their culture, their literature, their ‘thought’. I have to find the way to the station, buy a hamburger, publish my scientific findings, and sell my machines. A Humboldtian language education, in contrast, would focus on the Other, Thou: what is your worldview, what do you have to tell me? Learning Latin in the old days was perhaps rather close to that kind of language learning: it was not about communication, nobody wanted to buy a pizza from old Cicero or find the way to the Colosseum. It was just an encounter with linguistic structures and with poetical and not so poetical texts. What do you tell me, Ovid, how do you say this? This is very literary, yes indeed. It is about education, or with a very Humboldtian word, it is about *Bildung*.

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NOTES

¹ Henri Meschonnic, 'Penser Humboldt aujourd'hui', in *La Pensée dans la langue. Humboldt et après*, ed. by Henri Meschonnic (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1995), pp. 13–50. On Meschonnic's Humboldt, see Jürgen Trabant, 'Anmerkungen zu Meschonnic und Humboldt', in *Kodikas/Code*, 27 (2004), 131–41.

² The German Humboldt quotations are from Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 17 vols, ed. by Albert Leitzmann et al. (Berlin: Behr, 1903–36), hereafter quoted in the text as GS volume and page number.

³ The English translation by Peter Heath, *On Language. The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), is quoted – sometimes with slight modifications – as Heath followed by page number.

⁴ Donatella Di Cesare, 'Die Sprache als Paradigma der kommenden Gesellschaft. Über Humboldt in der Zukunft', in *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Universalität und Individualität*, ed. by Ute Tintemann and Jürgen Trabant (Munich: Fink, 2012), pp. 161–69.

⁵ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Kawi-Sprache auf der Insel Java*, 3 vols (Berlin: Druckerei der Königl. Akademie, 1836–39).

⁶ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, ed. by Jacques Brunschwig (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966 [1765]), p. 293: 'On enregistra avec le temps et mettra en dictionnaires et en grammaires toutes les langues de l'univers, et on les comparera entre elles; ce qui aura des usages très grands tant pour la connaissance des choses [...] que pour la connaissance de notre esprit et de la merveilleuse variété de ses opérations.'

⁷ '[D]er Irrthum ist längst verschwunden, dass sie ein Inbegriff von Zeichen von, ausser ihr, für sich bestehenden Dingen, oder auch nur Begriffen sey' (GS VII: 621).

⁸ Aristotle, *The Categories. On Interpretation. Prior Analytics* (London: Heinemann / Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 16a.

⁹ My translation, which diverges slightly from the translation by T. Harden and D. Farelly in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Essays on Language* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997), p. 18. If there is no reference to the published English translation, the translation is mine.

¹⁰ Humboldt's philosophy did not wait for modern psycho-philosophical ideas, as in Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), to conceive of the embodiment of thought.

¹¹ <<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:12007L/TXT&from=EN>>.

¹² <<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52008DC0566>>.

¹³ See Ulrich Ammon and Jan Kruse, 'Does Translation Support Multilingualism in the EU? Promises and Reality – The Example of German', *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 23.1 (2013), 15–30.

¹⁴ See Jürgen Gerhards, *Mehrsprachigkeit im vereinten Europa. Transnationales sprachliches Kapital als Ressource in einer globalisierten Welt* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2010).

¹⁵ 'Mehr Europa heißt nämlich nicht nur Mehrsprachigkeit für die Eliten, sondern Mehrsprachigkeit für immer größere Bevölkerungsgruppen, für immer mehr Menschen, schließlich für alle!' <<http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Joachim-Gauck/Reden/2013/02/130222-Europa.html>>.

¹⁶ Gerhards, *Mehrsprachigkeit im vereinten Europa*.

¹⁷ Philipp van Parijs, *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ See David Crystal, *Language Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Crystal also wrote the twin book to *Language Death*, i.e. *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁹ See Abram de Swaan, 'Endangered Languages, Sociolinguistics, and Linguistic Sentimentalism', *European Review*, 12 (2004), 567–80.

²⁰ Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind* (New York: Morrow, 1994).

²¹ See the Special Issue of *Zeitschrift für Semiotik*, 35,1–2 (2013), ed. by Martin Thiering, *Die Neo-Whorfian Theorie: Das Wiedererstarken des linguistischen Relativitätsprinzips*; and Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass: How Words Colour Your World* (London: Heinemann, 2010).

²² Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. by Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1620]), aphorism 59.

²³ Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965).