

The Myth of Monolingual Academia

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Abstract: While there is no doubt that English as a lingua franca fosters international exchange among scholars, the implications of its monopoly and of the marginalization of other languages are still to be discussed. In the following I will sketch out how a progressive “monolingualization” in certain areas could affect academic activity and research in general, though I will focus on the humanities and philosophy.

Keywords: English, humanities, languages, monolingualistic turn.

1. Introduction

To gain a hearing in the scientific community, one increasingly has to present one’s talks and articles in English. In Germany, the issue of this monolingualistic turn has been raised at numerous conferences and academic roundtables, recalled in manifestos and resolutions and discussed in several books and anthologies since the late seventies. Nonetheless it seems to be considered a matter of a rather insidious, nearly stealthy process. Whereas on the occasion of the 25th Constance Literary Colloquy in 1985 Harald Weinrich voiced his support for sharpening one’s “awareness of the threshold” (Weinrich 1986, 18), twenty years later Hans-Martin Gauger remains convinced that “the transition has taken place in almost complete silence” (Gauger 2005, 64). It seems that those observing the threshold with concern and those insouciantly crossing it are not the same. An illustrative example of the latter attitude can be found in the emerited professor of biology Hans Mohr, who during a symposium on the relation of scientific and ordinary language held in 2009 at the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities gleefully proclaimed that nowadays works written in various national languages can be confidently ignored.

This development results in a tendency towards monolingualism in certain areas (mainly concerning academic representations in international, but increasingly also in national contexts), as well as towards a kind of functional multilingualism in others (e.g. different national languages besides English for

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communicating scientific results to a broader audience, for informal laboratory discussions and other research related domains, in (still) the majority of seminars and lectures at least in the humanities and, of course, in everyday life).

2. Partitions and Perspectives

To outline the possible consequences of an increasing monolingualism for scientific activity, I'd like to take up a keyword of pragmatic philosophy of language: distinctive action. Denominating something means identifying it by distinguishing it from other things, and the various objects we denominate with the same predicator can be considered "the same" in this respect (while they still differ in others, cf. also Mittelstrass 1974). Of course this is the case not only in scientific, but also in everyday language. Moreover, we single out objects not only linguistically, but also by handling them in certain repeatable ways. In both cases, this turns out to be a very economic procedure: faced with a dining table, we don't have to ask ourselves every time we see it whether we are dealing with a gymnastic apparatus, a ritual object demanding devotion or simply a piece of furniture wonderfully suited for having dinner together. When talking about dining tables, we can leave many properties of specific tables unmentioned and still trust that we will be understood. And when we're dealing with the very concept of a dining table, we can even disregard the predicators of individual languages that, again in *this* respect and in others most probably not, can count as the same.

However, the transition from actions to sign-actions, from knowing-how to knowing that, from ordinary language to scientific terminologies – and from multilingual representations to monolingual ones – entails that local and historical variants gradually fade away. The thusly stabilized and decontextualized ways of dealing with things, whether in pragmatic contexts, in everyday language or in scientific language, are reliable means for successful actions and prosperous communication. These means are normally only taken into account when they reveal themselves as insufficient – when communication fails or common orientations become dubious – and when, in the interest of clarification, we wish to refer to various situations in which certain concepts and expressions are, have been or could be used.

On the one hand, this can again be accomplished by way of acting: an American singing teacher who wants to explain the expressive difference between "with simple tenderness" and "with sincere sympathy" to her Latvian student needn't have recourse to a dictionary but can simply show what this distinction is about. On the other hand it can also be done by referring to different life-worlds (am I talking about breakfast in Italy, Japan or England? About a novel in 18th century France or 21st century Germany?), to the terminologies of different disciplines (are we dealing with *consciousness* in a legal, psychological, neuroscientific or philosophical context?), by distinguishing a concept according to

different approaches in one and the same discipline (do I mean *sign* in the Saussurian or in the Peircean sense?), as well as by distinguishing ways of using one and the same predicator in individual languages generally intertwined with corresponding individual scientific cultures (do I mean *symbol* according to its usage in German or in the English-speaking world?)

3. Division of Labor vs. Dialogue

On most occasions, disambiguations don't have to be invented anew but can be retraced and (re)discovered, as if they had been implicitly present, ready to be explicated when needed. At times, though, the way to such "slumbering" distinctions can turn out to be quite long and tortuous, and all the more so the farther away we find ourselves from the contexts in which the respective terms were constituted – contexts that are probably even barely known because they stem from other life-worlds, and were coined in other language communities and other scholarly cultures. In the worst case, the terms in question present themselves as monolithic prefabricated elements that don't divulge their past in the form of prior distinctive actions, and whose history, as the history of differentiations and inner contradictions of a concept, no longer reveals itself.

Thus one finds oneself, to use a modern expression, in the situation of an *end-user* confronted with somewhat opaque objects, and in cases of doubt one has to rely on mediators. Faced with a scholarly language that is not rooted in one's own social and linguistic practices, and hence involves a dissociation of knowing-how and knowing-that, one needs translators of all sorts: specialists for intercultural communication, science journalists, interdisciplinarity experts or translators between national languages. And as long as the vision of English taking over completely remains pleasantly unlikely, i.e. as long as we live in a rich tradition of scientific and philosophical texts (not to mention literature) written in multitudinous national languages, this holds even more for English native speakers who only have a mastery of their mother tongue.

Apparently, academics and scientists can always claim that gaining proficiency in several languages would be an enormous waste of time and energy that could be better invested in research. Passing on the business of translation to others was exactly the method of choice when early modern scholars and craftsmen alike began to write in vernacular instead of Latin. Galileo, concerning his *Letters on Sunspots* written in Italian, acknowledges that it would be desirable that they could also be read in Latin by scholars in other countries. But in the same breath he asks his friend Paolo Gualdo to kindly take care of a translation to be provided by Martino Sandelli, given that he himself is "extremely busy" with other things (for more details see Trabandt 2005, 214f).

A little less apparently, this comfortable solution could have far-reaching consequences in the long run for both native and second-language speakers of English adopting scientific and philosophical

works exclusively in English: without making the effort to familiarize oneself with other languages, the ways in which terminologies and concepts are built up would no longer be anchored in one's own experience. One could not refer to prior experiences, nor could one gain new ones by way of comparison. What is lost here is the possibility of learning from one another, which goes far beyond the proper use of a dictionary. Familiarizing oneself with a language is about more than just words, it is about heuristic metaphors, about different sorts of orderings comprising different proximities and contrasts, including subtle nuances and undertones, possible associations and a whole system of interrelated predicators shaping and sharpening concepts in sometimes unexpected ways.

To give just one example: on the occasion of a debate entitled "Which Language(s) does Science Speak" carried out at the Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities in 2010, Carl Friedrich Gethmann reported several translations of the Heideggerian adjective *vorhanden*. In *Being and Time*, *vorhanden* is contrasted with *zuhause*: *zuhause* refers to things that are used with ease and without being questioned in (mostly instrumental) contexts of everyday life. In case of failure and malfunction, though, they come into focus as objects of (mostly scientific) empirical investigation and become *vorhanden*. Both terms have the connotation of the hand, which in the first case is literally handling a means without paying special attention to it, whereas in the second case the means itself is taken into consideration and, so to speak, is no longer *ready-to-hand*, but *in front of* the hand.

The translations offered for *vorhanden* in three different English editions of *On Time and Being* provided by Hofstadter, Macquarrie and Robinson, and Stambaugh are as follows (cf. Gethmann 2011, 61f): Hofstadter chooses *extant*, deriving from *existent*, thereby omitting the metaphor of the hand and neglecting the fact that this new term connotes *existence*, which for Heidegger means something different; Macquarrie and Robinson opt for *present at hand*, thereby preserving the hand metaphor but introducing a notion of temporality; Stambaugh eventually translates it with *objectively present*, whereby the hand metaphor again disappears, while the concept of objectivity comes out (which for Heidegger is not to be mixed up with the concept of *vorhanden*).

A student whose knowledge of Heidegger rests only upon one of these translations wouldn't have the slightest chance to find out what connotations have been somehow smuggled into the concept of *vorhanden* and which ones have been left out. Comparing all three translations (another kind of multilingualism) might possibly give rise to fruitful doubts. But only by going back to the original could he gain an insight in what being *vorhanden*, being *zuhause*, temporality, existence and objectivity might (or might not) have to do with each other in Heidegger's system of thought. In contrast to a merely passive reception, this reconstruction, which sheds light on both English and German, implies significant work from the reader's part. Thus his notion of *vorhanden* will not only be richer but also bear the traits of his own constructive activity and thus be recognizable as something not only found, but self-made (for the dialogical relation of construction and reconstruction see Lorenz 2005, 2008).

Conversely, to be dependent on terms and concepts that are inscrutable to a certain extent is not just regrettable in a way, but affects scientific self-conception at its core: it comprises a segregation of life-world and scholarship, a decline in the possibility of intersubjective review, a diminished ability to give reasons and, eventually, a partial loss of autonomy.

4. (Re-)Mythologizations

According to Kant, our own constructive activity is a necessary condition for any kind of understanding: we only understand what we are able to produce ourselves. And for the 18th century Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico, who anticipated Kant in stating that the criterion for recognizing something is to have created it oneself, the discovery that the social world is not given by the gods but man-made is the precondition for the ascent from barbarian myth to human science. Moreover, ideas and words whose history can't be reconstructed are in Vico's eyes like bastards without genealogy: to be able to name the father, be it of biological or intellectual children, is what characterizes the transition from bestiality to the first human societies.

Concerning the unlucky combination of monolingualism on the one hand and being at the mercy of translators on the other hand, to speak of bestiality (as opposed to human sociality and to a traceable history of ideas) and myth (as opposed to science) may seem exaggerated. However, once we are left with stray terms with unknown families, neighbors, friends and enemies, it is not a great leap before we find ourselves in the midst of flourishing mythologies. When we are no longer able to critically examine our concepts, their usage every so often turns out to be due more to habit, prestige or faith than to reason. In a captivatingly ironic essay about German as a language of philosophy, Andreas Kemmerling gives an account of a both amusing and alarming discussion he had with his editor about how to translate the English term *reference* into German (Kemmerling 1999, 112). Although there is a German verb for *to refer* (*Bezug nehmen*) and also a corresponding noun (*Bezugnahme*), the editor asked him to use *Referenz* instead, obviously mistaking *reference* for a technical term (which it is not). Informed that *Bezugnahme* means just the same, he insisted that the text was about this *special* kind of reference, i.e. *Referenz*, not to be conflated with *Bezugnahme*. Anyhow, if information is a difference that makes a difference, the one between *Referenz* and *Bezugnahme* is void of it.

5. Communication and Cognition

What I have said so far about the desirability of multilingualism in an emphatic sense might lead to ask whether we are really dealing with more than a revival of well-known discussions – e.g. those on the standardization of everyday language in scientific language, or those concerning the function of the humanities, which allegedly consists in sensibilizing us to differences in general and preserving the awareness of former differentiations and orientations.

The issue of academic mono- or multilingualism is certainly part of these general problems of mediation, but they take on a new dimension insofar as 1) we are now dealing with the threat of unfounded (and maybe more and more unfindable) adoptions within one and the same discipline and 2) cultures of knowledge, including the respective social practices, fade into the background for linguistic reasons (though certainly coupled with the aspect of economic power).

But there is more to it: just as academic language is constantly affected and vivified from the bottom up by everyday language, and just as the humanities not only reassure us of our past but also have the potential to broaden the domain of what can be thought and researched, a plea for linguistic diversity is more than just a call for an unworldly recollection of linguistic roots. Rather it is meant as an invitation to not leave the reflection on linguistic means to linguists and historians of science, but to conceive it as an integral part of every single discipline – and this counts for native speakers of English as well.

A point not mentioned so far but not to be left aside is that what we are witnessing is much more a matter of Globalization than of Anglification, more akin to the search for the least common denominator than for the least common multiple, and what comes out is often not much more than a faint echo of English as a fully developed language. Revealingly, the biologist quoted above ended his statement with the terse remark that we have no further use for formerly common national languages like French, German or English (sic!) as universal scientific languages. Unquestionably, the *koiné* he has in mind is what sarcastic tongues call “English II” – an auxiliary construct with a significantly reduced syntax, made of nouns and passe-partout verbs like *be, do, make, put* etc. that can be combined with adverbs and prepositions (cf. Hentig 2005, 48ff). Such a limited equipment can be very handy for swiftly communicating results of research, but whether it allows for tentative attempts within the research process, groping for the right words to give shape and form to questions and hypothesis, is open to doubt. If we emphasize not only the communicative, but also the cognitive function of language – or, as Humboldt put it, if we consider that language is primarily a means for the discovery of truths not yet known – English II is the most inappropriate scientific language imaginable. And if it were the only one available, it would usher in a notion of scholarship as a collection of ready-made (or ready-found) knowledge to be passed on in compendiums, handbooks and PowerPoint presentations, not too far from the canonization of handed-down ideas in the Latin scientific community before in early modern times the scientific domain was taken over by scholars who, in their search for something not yet thought and said, began to write in their mother tongues.

Again, what is at stake here is the opportunity to learn from one another by way of attaining a shared and common understanding of things in the light of a stimulating plurality of perspectives – and to conceive the experience of alterity, the confrontation with what is historically, culturally and linguistically different, as fundamental for one’s own self-conception and thus also for one’s future scientific activities. Openness and curiosity towards a multiplicity of shades and styles, aspects and traditions, ways of arguing and raising questions, far from being leisurely retrospective, is what sharpens the eye for the inner relation between reconstruction and construction, between knowing-that and knowing-how, between what we do and how we do it, as well as for the provisional and ever evolving character of knowledge. And hence an indispensable precondition for the passage from what is to what could be.

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