

# **Theses on the Problem of the Language of Philosophy of Education in a Globalized World**

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1. Wilhelm von Humboldt, the great theoretician of the *Bildung* tradition in Germany, assumes a close connection between language and national culture. According to Humboldt, every language implies its own worldview and is an expression of its own way of life. Languages are interwoven with their culture and time. Language is the medium of intermediation and interaction between human beings and the world. In the diversity of languages, the richness of the world and the diversity of its knowledge become accessible. The linguistic expressions are not mere descriptions of a thing -- they can also be these as well -- but in many respects they are different views of a thing. Language therefore includes conversation and speeches, but also arguing and debates. This shows that mutual understanding is possible, but all understanding is always also a non-understanding (cf. Humboldt 1963: 439). The inaccuracies, differences and constant changes in language cannot be reversed.

2. The conclusion of these thoughts for educational theory is the significance of the knowledge of foreign languages. Through the learning of foreign languages, a different culture is also learned and an initially foreign worldview is opened up. As a result, the habit of speaking in one's mother tongue loses its matter of course, its claim to always accurately depict and express the world. The naturalness of the conventional worldview, of one's own tradition and culture reveals itself to be an illusion. Education through foreign languages thus includes the relativizing of one's own point of view and an opening to new and different perspectives, not to mention a gain in reflexivity towards one's native language and insight into the plurality of cultures and worldviews. And that is precisely what education in the sense of *Bildung* is about: the enlargement and

enrichment of knowledge and feeling through the confrontation with the diversity of the world, to which the plurality of languages and cultures belongs (cf. Koller 1999: 90ff), and also insight into the intermediation of the world through language.

3. This also addresses the problem of monolingualism, the unshaken self-confidence that one's own linguistic expression is generally understandable, i.e. that one depicts the world as it is and articulates a view of things that is acceptable to all others. The unsettling experience of translating and the experiences of not being able to express oneself are foreign to those whose language is also spoken by speakers of other languages. The possibility of self-reflexively relativizing one's own views, customs and cultural habits through the work of translation remains closed to them. Liz Jackson and Naoko Saito have already pointed this out. Their conclusion is that it is a worthwhile and welcome goal to rethink international conferences and academic associations as "places of mutual learning" in which the "art of translation" is cultivated (Saito 2019: 17).

4. In the tradition of German philosophy of *Bildung*, the learning of foreign languages and the understanding of people from other cultures is a goal of general education not only restricted to academics or philosophers. Jackson's case studies show that these are not philosophical problems and not problems only for university teachers, but current problems of human coexistence today. If we are responsible for "the cultivation and maintenance of dispositions of openness and the tolerance of consciousness for the 'known unknown'" (Jackson 2019: 1), then this implies the concern for the general education of all. I see the concern for the preservation of general education founded in the fact that the differences between the higher and the less educated, between academics and non-academics, develop into a societal division between people whose work encourages cosmopolitan thinking through its international character and people whose work is tied to their local cultures, especially when nationalist politicians and populists deepen this societal and political division with propagandistic oppositions of "we" and "the others", of "regular people" and "the elite".

5. The English language has developed into the *lingua franca* of science. This reflects the economic and political dominance of the USA in history since the Second World War and, conversely, the loss of economic and political significance of Germany, France and Russia. We should not disregard the aspect of political and economic power as a background for internationalization strategies and cultural-political exports and the dangers of political and economic instrumentalization, nor should we disregard the

discussion of ways of overcoming the differences between East and West, and also the differences between North and South.

6. Now the problem of a common English scientific language in international contexts is different in the natural sciences, medicine and technology on the one hand and in the humanities and social sciences on the other hand. Saito rightly points to the errors in the understanding of language that support monolingualism (Saito 2019: 10). By referring to natural facts or technically defined objects, the first scientific group does not have the linguistic translation problems of the humanities and the social sciences in regard to their objects, which are historically, culturally and socially constituted objects. The intertwining of these objects with the specific languages sets limits to a worldwide common scientific language; the plurality of cultures and languages is presupposed and these facts require translations. It is therefore the task of philosophy as well as the humanities and the social sciences to articulate the problems of monolingualism in a socially audible way, to defend themselves against the dominance of economics, technology and the natural sciences and to draw critical attention to colonial tendencies and power structures.

7. The communication of scientists from many different countries and the internationalization of scientific exchange are made possible by the common use of the English language. This is a great gain and not to be underestimated at all, but it may not be the end in the development of scientific internationalization. For me, the question is that, beyond the use of the English language, multilingualism will also remain a sensible goal, so that a "bidirectional academic exchange" of non-English-speaking scientists, which used to exist and still exists, will also be possible in the future. Theodor W. Adorno (2003) answered to the question of why he returned to Germany after his forced emigration to the USA during National Socialism and in view of the terror and crimes of the Second World War, that the German language, as the language of his homeland, enabled him to express his thoughts in a differentiated and precise way. But precision and differentiation in philosophical or even humanistic considerations are difficult to maintain or convey when a third language has to come between author and reader.

8. Multilingual conferences, which do not only offer parallel monolingual events, are quite possible, Switzerland with its four official languages offers examples of this. If it is not feasible to understand several languages at the respective scientific or philosophical level, then experts are needed who can translate, explain and bring closer

to us the philosophy, literature or discourses of the other countries. It is undoubtedly insufficient and critical just to talk about the others, but according to Kenichi Mishima it is not enough to talk to the others in order to understand them, but for understanding it is important to hear "what the others talk to each other and also against each other" (Mishima/Schwentker 2015: 18). This translation and explanation work of experts of the foreign culture, history, and society is indispensable for an adequate and real understanding of the others, even if more scientists will be able to understand or to talk in more than one foreign language.

9. A central problem of educational philosophy is the question of what is universal when we recognize the diversity of cultures and languages, our particularity and attachment to our origins, and the difficulties of translation and understanding. Are there universal principles from which we can understand each other and deal with the problems and conflicts in the world? How can we adequately explain "what is human about us" (Jackson 2019: 6) in order to find common ground? Seyla Benhabib's interpretation of human dignity is the proposal of a minimal ethic in pluralistic societies that can provide a capable basis for a consensus of different societies: "We deserve respect not only because we are reasonable beings capable of acting in accordance with moral law, but also because we are vulnerable beings with a physical existence potentially exposed to torture, rape, slavery, servitude and violence and therefore to be protected. Treating a person with dignity does not only mean treating him with respect; it also prohibits the exercise of violence and cruelty against him". (Benhabib 2016: 278) This proposal seems to me worth considering and worth discussing (cf. Wigger 2019).

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