Language

Jürgen Wertheimer

„Manche Worte gibts, die treffen wie Keulen,
Doch manche schluckst du wie Angeln und
Schwimmst weiter und weißt es noch nicht."

Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Worte.

"There are some words that strike like clubs,
Still others you swallow like fishing line and
Keep swimming, not knowing it yet."

Hugo von Hofmannsthal. [Words].

Liz Möhn

Everything begins with the question of language. And ends with it. Those who lose touch with language lose touch with reality – and we are in danger of losing this language game.

A few days ago, I had the opportunity to discuss with a colleague who had fled from Odessa the question of whether there were similarities between the Russian and Ukrainian languages or whether they were more or less two different languages. The answer came as if shot from a pistol and with great decisiveness: they are two completely different languages, she said. A little later, in conversation with a Slavic colleague from Germany, the problem took a completely different turn: Russian and Ukrainian differ from each other in some ways, she explained, but they are still two closely related East Slavic languages.

This episode shows the power of language(s) and I very much want to point out from the start that language is not simply a medium of communication, but that it can also be a central arena for ideological dispute and political struggle. It is not only a means of depicting reality, but is capable of generating reality.

To give another current example: many people are puzzling over the almost obsessive intrusion of the asterisk into the body of the German language (in an attempt to make it gender neutral). The debate here is toggling back and forth between outrage and defiant dogmatism. For some, it is the symbolic fulfillment of a long overdue promise; for others, it is an aesthetic nuisance and proof of disrespect. It is easy to see from the debate's vehemence that it is about more than purely linguistic matters: it is indeed about a clash of cultures, fought out in the medium of language.

It is therefore high time that we examine the question of language and languages.

I   Language / Languages

Let us begin with the most concrete case: that of "languages" themselves. Anyone who robs people of language, or dictates or imposes it on them, is also determining the lives they lead. Linguistic boundaries are systemic boundaries. Of the some 7,000 languages in existence, far more than 2,000 are currently threatened with extinction. The "death of a language" largely coincides with the death of an ethnic group, a tribe, a people.

What we are talking about here is not the "natural" extinction of languages, their gradual demise, but their ruthless suppression through political or economic dominance, often in keeping with the law of the "survival of the fittest." The death of minor languages is usually accompanied by the death of cultural diversity. In theory, we celebrate the cult of "diversity." Reality is now showing us the decline of the niches and the victory of homophony.

At the same time, a new danger is increasingly taking shape: the takeover by the English language. The problem here is not language confusion and diversification, but linguistic "superpowership":

English as a superpower, spoken by 350 million native speakers and hundreds of millions of people for whom it is a second language. Transport, business, media, cultural exchange – everything is focused, calibrated, standardized, normed by one language. Smaller languages are threatened with extinction one after the other like animal and plant species.

Yet this linguistic power shift is resulting in other, more deeply felt changes, e.g. the triumphal march of the English language into universities and other academic organizations. Just to be clear: no one can doubt the usefulness of this new lingua franca as a makeshift bridge and medium of communication. And of course there are bilingual talents who switch back and forth smoothly be-tween English and their native tongue. And I do not want to set the bar too high and, in this context, cite Adorno, who famously assumed that "the crucial things that we have to say [can] only be said in German."

Yet the question of the purpose behind our linguistic "subjugation" must be posed when (as can now be observed almost daily) German-speaking scholars at high-level forums artificially and more or less successfully attempt to talk in English to an audience of mostly German speakers – appar-ently to satisfy an undefinable need by the "scientific community" for internationality. This may be a question of style: when what matters is the content, then the whole thing ceases to be amusing – since what is at stake here is accuracy and correctly assessing the foundation upon which words rest, properly grasping the blurred edges of words that often have connotations and associations.

II   The Great Reduction

Yet it's not only about "false friends" in the narrower sense – that is, pairs of words from two different languages that have a (completely) different or only partially the same meaning despite having the same or similar phonologic-orthographic form. For example: the German *genial* (ingenious) and the English "genial"; the German *ordinär* (vulgar) and the English "ordinary"; the German, French, Italian and Spanish *transpirieren, transpirer, traspirare, transpirar*, which accord with "perspire" in English and not "transpire."

What is more significant, it seems to me, is that the more or less self-evident, more or less suc-cessful general shift to the seemingly salvatory lingua franca of English is gradually re-imposing itself on other native languages and leading to a certain decimation. All the stumbling blocks and peculiarities of the respective national language are being filed down preemptively in order to make them suitable internationally. The attempt to translate them into English does the rest and gener-ates yet another danger, namely that of being only half understood professionally, especially when it comes to nuances and allusions. The extremely culturally dependent and often decisive factor of irony also plays a not unimportant role here. With a fatal consequence: hardly anyone involved in cultural or academic exchange wants to expose himself or herself as not having understood a statement or not having understood it fully.

III   Lost in Translation: Limits and Possibilities: On the Pitfalls of Journeying Linguistically across Borders

One can view the problem of translation the way Umberto Eco expresses it in the title of one of his books: "Dire quasi la stessa cosa in un'altra lingua" – to say approximately the same thing in an-other language. It sounds plausible enough, if this same Umberto Eco did not then take almost 400 pages to prove the opposite, namely – and one can and/or must view it this way – that almost never does translating produce "quasi la stessa cosa" on the other side.

The journey into the other text is a difficult journey. Taken seriously, translating is not a vacation, but an exodus, not a flirtation, but a strenuous, demanding relationship between two languages and two cultures. Or should I say less emotionally: translating corresponds to the act of changing money from one currency to another, whereby one assumes, give or take a few percent, that one will receive the equivalent amount. An assumption that usually proves deceptive.

Translating is dangerous, since one dives into the world of the foreign and transports the message into the realm of one's own.

The reality is that one person honestly tries to understand and accurately reproduce the meaning of the original, while at the same time corresponding as closely as possible to the conditions of the usually somewhat more familiar target culture, in which and for which the text is being translated.

And in this "wanting to be understood" lies, of course, *the* hermeneutical problem of the translating business. The translation is a promise. The promise of a leap across time (and culture). A translation fills in the gap. In such a way that, when done well, one no longer sees the gap. And thinks that one understands everything.

IV   False Proximity

Translating has sometimes been referred to as a "temporary identification process." This is not unproblematic. After all, those who make a language-based image of the foreign reality believe they understand it and are considered its mediators. They import the foreign in the shape of the familiar. A response is needed to this threat. Incidentally, this problem cannot be overcome by pointing out the translator's lack of "empathy," since it is not a question of competence or sensitivity to context. On the contrary, the most accurate connoisseurs of the culture from which one translates are often the most dangerous and unscrupulous translators. The message posted in a bottle changes and, at the end of an interpretive "translocation," what one pulls out is a different message than what was originally dispatched. One could even believe that the aphorism is true: "Poetry is what's lost in translation."

I know, it is customary to trivialize the dilemma of difference with the argument that it is not about identity, but *equivalence.* As if the search for what roughly matches could even begin to bring about the same thing. Needless to say, we are not only referring to the extreme case of poetic language. Every verse translation just as often gives rise to the dilemma of drifting between a choke-hold on the original's structures and the freestyle, creative search for the so-called equivalent. It could well be that Walter Benjamin's dictum applies, namely that the translator must always stand "outside the inner high forest of language."[1]

The use of the same terms does not ensure an equality of ideas, however. On the contrary, the danger that other worlds are hidden under the same words is immense. And immense misunderstandings based on the "same" words seem inevitable. Soon something will be valid for the whole world that until now, according to Karl Kraus, has only applied to the Austrian-German relationship: "What separates us is our common language."

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[1]   Walter Benjamin. Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers [The Translator's Task], p. 16.

In one of his essays on the theory of translation, no less than the old master of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, reflects on precisely this aspect of the issue. And if one views translating under this aspect, as a fight for polyphony, autonomy and pluralism, as a passionate struggle for one's own language, voice, the idiosyncrasy of words – then all of the questions we have discussed heretofore arise anew. The struggle for translation becomes cultural pluralism's struggle for survival.

V   Susan Sontag's Warning

Susan Sontag once sketched an authentic scenario that has already become reality for thousands of Indian service providers: trained as telephone operators for Indian telephone companies, they are schooled in American English, intonation, phonetics, modulation and – renamed. Sam, Linda and Dolly speak, offering their services in NBC voices, and are exactingly evaluated and ranked in terms of their linguistic professionalism. The second colonization completes the program of subjugation all the way down to language's deep-seated structure: battery farming for language clones. Gone are the days when Schleiermacher, Novalis or Benjamin puzzled over whether one should bring the reader to the text or the text to the reader, whether a translation should be "grammatical, modifying or mythical" or communicate "the pleasure of strangeness" (Schleiermacher). Large-scale standardization of opinions and languages is the order of the day. Time to patiently listen to others – now only a nostalgic reminiscence.

Against the background of this threatening development, the previous observations should not be understood as notorious complaints, but as a warning. Translating is necessary (despite all the irresolvable contradictions). It is becoming a key technology for pluri-cultural survival, and what is at stake is the survival of an open, unregulated, dynamic, free cultural wilderness. Seen in this light, every attempt at translation, no matter how whimsical, is a moment of subversive power that slightly unsyncs the all-too-smooth nightmare of the plasticized norm of business and everyday language.

VI   War of Words

Every "spontaneous" escalation of violence, every "war between cultures" is preceded by a culture war. Its weapons: paper and printer's ink, TV monitors, social media. Its arena: language. Language is the software in the arsenal of wars between "cultures." Their processes are similar to the point of interchangeability, their deployment of language analogous to the point of confusion. If one were to fast-forward through the genocides and massacres, the exterminations and annihilations of the recent past, what would emerge would be a more or less identical pattern.

Language stands at the intersection of reality and perception, fact and fiction. Almost nowhere will one find this connection more aptly formulated than in Nietzsche's essay *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne* (On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense), which led directly to the modern era and which I feel obliged to mention here. In it, he writes of the "mobile army of metaphors"[2] which determines our thoughts and feelings, and of our cultural values as linguistically made "illusions, about which one has forgotten that this is what they are."[3]

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[2]   Friedrich Nietzsche. Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne [On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense].

[3]   Friedrich Nietzsche. Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne [On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense].

A couplet by Schiller that speaks of language "which versifies and thinks for thee"[4] perhaps means something similar – an automatic language that sets something in motion, that not only refers to the things of this world, not only versifies and thinks for me, but also directs my feelings, shapes my attitudes, controls my mental state, all the more self-evidently the more unconsciously one abandons oneself to it. Similar thoughts are expressed in Viktor Klemperer's almost forgotten book *LTI. Notizbuch eines Philologen* (LTI. A Philologist's Notebook) with regard to the *lingua tertii imperii*, the language of the Third Reich. Klemperer attempts to grasp the mechanism of language-generated reality, although he does not believe that only the major diatribes and the mass declarations determined the demagogue's success. Rather:

> National Socialism slid into flesh and blood, into the subconscious of the crowd through single words, phrases, sentences, which it forced upon them through millions of repetitions, and which were adopted mechanically and unconsciously.[5]

Klemperer shows how this mechanism works using the example of *fanatisch* (fanatic), impressively demonstrating how the minimally dosed, initially imperceptible poisoning of speech and thought proceeds:

> If a person says "fanatic" long enough for "heroic" and "virtuous," he will ultimately believe that a fanatic is a virtuous hero and without fanaticism one cannot be a hero. The words "fanaticism" and "fanatic" were not invented by Hitlerism's strategists – they were only ascribed another value and used more often than at other times. Changed semantic valences, an increase in word frequencies – what formerly belonged to an individual or at most to a tiny splinter group gradually becomes common property. Language is confiscated for the party, made subservient to the system and, in the worst case, after a few years pathology enjoys majority support.[6]

In just a few sentences, Klemperer outlines the crucial process and sketches the crucial phase, those months and years in which linguistic poison seeps – initially unnoticed – into the space of public discourse and begins paralyzing the mechanics of collective perception and communication. Which individual processes occur here? Which levels of conscious and unconscious feeling are affected?

VII   Illusions of Belonging

Whether Trump or Putin, slogans from Germany's right-wing AfD party or populist tirades of every stripe. The war of words does not begin with curses, but, on the contrary, with promises. One should not make the mistake of underestimating the sophistication of strategies used during the process of gradual infiltration. The organizers understand how to phrase things suggestively and how to distance themselves from clumsy, direct statements. In one of its programmatic papers, for example, the far-right German NPD party spoke of "respect for the natural inequality of people" and that human dignity requires taking this difference into account and separating the unequal from each other. That which ultimately results in exclusion and purification presents itself under the cloak of human dignity and justice. Even Putin's perversion of the term "Nazi" corresponds to this scheme. And strictly avoiding the word "war" by substituting the euphemism "covert operation" accords here as well. To be sure, the reach, speed and omnipresence of digital messages make the militarization of language more efficient than in the past. The techniques used, however, have hardly changed.

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[4]   Friedrich Schiller. Xenien [Xenia].

[5]   Viktor Klemperer: LTI, p. 21.

[6]   Viktor Klemperer: LTI, p. 24.

The war in Kosovo in the 1990s began not with bombs, but with an ideological arms race. It began with words, fine words. Words like "brotherhood," "unity" and "community." At the start, all this always sounds completely natural, as if someone, by proxy, were formulating the justified concerns of a large group. It sounds like Milošević, for example, during the "meeting" on April 27, 1987:

> We must not allow the misfortune of misfortunate people to be exploited by nationalists, whom every honest man must oppose. We must protect […] brotherhood and unity. […] Neither do we wish, nor are we able to separate Albanians and Serbs from each other, but we must draw a line between upstanding and progressive people.[7]

Furthermore, he speaks of the "last tragic exodus of a European people" and a "procession of martyrs and oppressed since the Middle Ages." Yet one waits in vain for nationalist or ethnic topics, just as Putin long spoke of "brotherhood." Whether Milošević or his political opponents, whether Hitler, Stalin, Robespierre, Trump or Putin – they all (and a thousand others) have understood how to offer a scaffolding of words that promotes identification and identity in times of political or economic crisis. A territory of language, an artificial paradise of purported feelings, arbitrary ideas and presumed longings. All of this seems based in reality and presents itself expertly, but, in its essence, it is nothing but a sheath of symbols that is superimposed, as it were, on individual people. Thus, language helps to create the reality it professes to describe and depict.

VIII Counter-narratives

In most "culture" wars, the parties to the conflict know each other very well. Often acquainted since childhood, they understand exactly the strengths and weaknesses, the peculiarities of the "other." It is not the demonizable stranger, the unknown, who becomes the enemy, but the well-known. The war between Russia and Ukraine has confirmed this in a tragic way. In most cases, it is precisely the one with whom one has lived together, or at least coexisted more or less harmoniously, more or less peaceably, even in conflict. The manipulative art practiced by the perpetrators of "culture" wars consists in erasing this level of complex, individual primary experience and replacing it with schematic, construed collective secondary experience. A hopeless undertaking, one would think – and then must ascertain that exactly the opposite is true.

The Nazis even managed the neat trick of alienating a group that had been assimilated to the point of indistinguishability and of enduringly overlaying the erased primary experience of normality with the secondary experience of atrocity. So enduringly that the stereotypes cum distorted images replaced the factually existing and known individuals and were erased with them. Such replacements of reality precede every genocide. Only when the actual individual drops off the perceptual radar screen can the program turn into a pogrom.

In order to satisfy the latent need for a clear identity, in order to satisfy the hunger for heritage, more is needed than mere programmatic terminology. Only words which taste of blood, which tell of downfalls and casualties, make it possible for things to become symbols, for facts to become myths.

By superimposing on the things it represents, the symbol replaces the reality of those things. The ideologically undead dwell in the collective symbolic storehouse of memory and recollection, transmitting their fantasies to the perceptions of others. Even skeptical thinkers like the French

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[7]   Slobodan Milošević. Speech given on April 24, 1987.

sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (*On Collective Memory*, 1992) put their faith in a collective memory that can be linguistically activated at any time. Personal and collective sensibility are made one.

The revenants and undead are omnipresent, are a reminder, a warning, but sometimes also: fodder for agitators. People cry for revenge on behalf of martyrs; justice is demanded on behalf of victims who have long since receded into the past; in the name of justice, new victims are created, prompting the opposing side to continue shooting in the name of justice and to continue churning the unending gyre of collective memory. Language as a medium for memory cannot always be seen as unproblematic; it often acts as a lubricant for revanchist desires.

IX   Peacemakers

Yet another group of questionable peacemakers must be remembered in this context: the species of "signal senders." They, too, do not speak the language of hate, but that of reconciliation. Their symbolic "language of love" distorts in well-meaning fashion, whereas the language of hate did this from base motives. But it distorts all the same. It depicts Auschwitz as a site of catharsis and delights in meticulously restoring empty synagogues. It continues to call Sarajevo and Mostar places of "multicultural existence" and symbolically provides reconstruction aid. It loves to express itself in symbolic gestures and to send signals.

As early as 1995, immediately after the Dayton "peace treaty" – the blood of the massacre at Srebrenica had hardly been washed away – an enormous phase of linguistic white magic began in Bosnia, an absurd campaign of poetic rearmament of the territory that had sunk into rubble: an "International Peace Center" was founded as the site of a "Memoria Bosniaca." One might suddenly speak, in a high tone, of the emergence of a new experience:

> Word by word a new constellation emerges, untranslatable without personal experience. A new constellation in the center of the world, in Sarajevo [!], in Sarajevo's burnt down National Library, accompanied by the ceremony of sacrifice [!] of "Memorial Bosniace," accompanied by the sounds of harp, letter, speech, page …[8]

The celebration of the dead as a poetic act – a fascinating vision for artists, certainly, but also an attitude not without its dangers. After all, from the point of view of art, the ritual, be it sacrifice, curse or apotheosis, is an apex of inspiration. That which represents the banal end for human beings serves as material for the artist.

It would be helpful, however, to find a language that trains people to get along without the cloak of symbolic pseudo-identities. It would be a language which rejects the cultural illusions that have been crudely refuted by reality and, at the same time, the endeavor to develop a well-founded concept that nevertheless attempts to reconstruct central elements of this culture. To stay with the example of Bosnia, the European longing is called "multicultural Bosnia"; the Bosnian reality is called: the victory of the separatists and of ethnic segregation. The nostalgic European dream gushes about a Mostar of mixed cultures; the reality of Mostar is: it is two cities.

The symbol of the dream is the bridge – the reality is the bridge standing in ruins. It makes no sense to rebuild, in defiant resistance, the desecrated symbol without first transforming reality so that the bridge corresponds to it. It is not capitulating to the folly of the hardliners if one renounces an

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[8]   Jürgen Wertheimer. Krieg der Wörter [War of Words].

artificial language that overcomes the contradiction only grammatically. And it is not capitulating if one renounces – for a time – the use of symbols that do not mirror the present or reality at all, and are thus empty ciphers.

Why should it not be possible to let cultures exist separately from each other, at least for a time? If at some point the inhabitants should again feel the need to make contact of their own accord, the right time will have come to support such efforts. But not one day sooner. A cultural heritage should not be more important than the people who produced that heritage. Therefore, one should not expose oneself to the attraction of self-made images and create a pressure that confuses cause and effect and allows people to become the objects of their own symbols.

Decked out in the feathers of a language borne by wishful thinking and accompanied by the promise of a better life, mudslinging can be rhapsodized into a holy crusade. Passed off as purity, one's own stupidity becomes cult, misguided fools become martyrs, the ineffectual are transformed into legends; envy reads as mass anger, sadism grit, murder sacrifice. Sacrificial murders are papered over with statistics.

"Pursue your phrases, up to the point where they are embodied,"[9] Büchner has one of his revolutionaries say, a bit too late, in order to make the language-averse side of history visible and thus show the mechanics of using a language in which every comma is indeed a saber cut, every period a severed head, and syntax and semantics have generally become the load-bearing elements of a strategy that aims for legitimation but brings death. Unfortunately, the sentence is spoken only after the agitators themselves are sitting on death row and the guillotines they set in motion have already run hot.

Iconoclasm and a word-war on the one side, symbolic image-making and word-magic on the other: each of the two linguistic processes is ultimately used to legitimize politically private claims to power. Those to whom these messages are addressed initially have virtually nothing to do with the content conveyed. Thus, if one looks for measures to de-escalate conflict potentials, they consist solely in (re)establishing this state of perception. The deconstruction of symbolizations that are inimical to life is, consequently, equivalent to rehabilitating one's own senses.

During the Bosnian war, public buildings were covered with chauvinist graffiti. Every government agency, bus stop, post office bore the heroic slogan: "This is Serbia!" Few had the courage and sly intelligence to answer these verbal nationalist exaggerations by pointing out their spuriousness. For example, by spraying the counter-slogan: "Idiot, this is the post office!" In this case, of course, the response came too late, because a little later the wall, the post office and the customers were blown up ...

X   Language Bombs and Verbal Duds

"War of attrition," "corporate raiders," … – a few words and the emotions begin to cascade. This happens unceasingly and mostly on purpose. The greatest despisers of language are at the same time its greatest profiteers.

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[9]   Georg Büchner. Dantons Tod [Danton's Death].

And we, the addressees, abide in a strange mélange of emotions, are jumpy and robust at the same time. And sometimes a single word like "Holodomor" is enough to unleash far-reaching fusillades of opinion. Historian Andreas Kappeler cannot decide whether the term, which was taboo in the Soviet Union until 1990 and denotes millions of deaths by starvation under Stalinism, describes "genocide" (as the majority of Ukrainian historians think) or just part of a general strategy of extermination. And even terms that seem to have unambiguous connotations in our eyes, such as "Nazi," can take a completely unexpected semantic turn within the invaders' grammar and simply be used for everything that positions itself as anti-Russian.

As one sees, no term is so flawlessly defined that it cannot become an ideological pitfall. Or, in other words: every term has the potential to be semantically reversed into its opposite in a given situation. Everything depends on which "framing" it is given, and emotionally highly charged terms in particular can become bombshells that baffle, and occasionally paralyze, the opponent. In this context, one cannot help but recall the breakneck linguistic U-turns that the anti-vaxxer members of the Querdenker movement in Germany made to manipulatively appropriate and occupy the vocabulary of the Enlightenment (understanding, reason, freedom) to their own ends. Critical arguments were subsequently suspected of mainstream manipulation that was paving the way for an imminent "health dictatorship."

All this in the slipstream of a comprehensive linguistic shift that originated in the United States during the Trump era. There is no point in pretending: the system of fake news invalidated all previously applicable rules. It is probably true that statistically only a relatively small part of the population could not see through the ruse of manufacturing apparently authentic, in reality freely invented news. Nevertheless, the systematic use of this rhetorical technology engenders a horrendous degree of uncertainty and lost trust.

How is one not to think in this context of the conclusions Nietzsche draws in his essay *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, in which he already makes a final cut between concept and meaning:

> What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.[10]

One should not hastily dismiss this thesis as too culturally critical or pessimistic. With the one, admittedly decisive addendum that conceptual counterfeit money has meanwhile become an established currency, at a minimum a questionable yet successful linguistic cryptocurrency.

XI   False Labels

A few months ago, a notable part of the Green Party called for the term "Germany" to be avoided programmatically – it could possibly arouse resentment or cause hurt feelings. A few days later, there was a public discussion about possibly renaming the Eberhard Karls University in Tübingen – the founder's name was said to have anti-Semitic associations, and an assessment was being

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[10]   Friedrich Nietzsche. Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne [On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense].

made of whether those associations were strong, medium or weak. And less than 24 hours later, a Facebook tweet by a nationally known mayor triggered a debate about the meaning, purpose and limits of regulating language to reflect identity politics.

It is unmistakable: in this phase of gender, heteronormativity, hate speech, MeToo, Black Lives Matter, diversity, identity politics, cancel culture, political correctness, etc., the air is getting thinner – a flood of behavioral regulations overwhelms the user (regardless of gender, if you please), taking away one's breath and unsettling many. Some have the impression and formulate it loudly: one wrong word and you are out, and you then discover yourself in a shitstorm stoked by the asocial media. The battles to determine who calls the shots in the field of language are becoming tougher and the source of mixed emotions. On the one hand, language has seldom been taken as seriously as it is now – the mega-critical language fetishist Karl Kraus might think his wishes had finally come true if a missing or misplaced comma can trigger a war.

Yet there is another side to the matter, one that is less easy to assess. Due to the many explicit and implicit regulations, the flow of language is becoming sluggish or drying up completely. There are reports of journalists who avoid writing about certain topics – believing that every word can turn into a trap.

The situation is comparatively harmless when it comes to language critiques. Terms such as *Rückführungspatenschaft* (repatriation sponsorship) and *Corona-Diktatur* (Covid dictatorship) have recently been sent to Germany's semantic pillory. The linguists of the Darmstadt Jury made their decisions, quite correctly assessing linguistic developments and mis-developments. The term *Corona-Diktatur*, which has been frequently used by members of the Querdenker movement and propagandists since the beginning of public discourse on the pandemic in order to discredit governmental measures to contain the pandemic's spread, is one of the semantic achievements of recent years, as are *Hochriskikogruppe* (high-risk group), *Maskenverweigerer* (mask refusers) and *Systemrelevanz* (system relevance) – a kind of semantic triage.

But the consensual branding of a few black semantic sheep is no longer enough. The problems run deeper and are more serious. It seems we are at the beginning of a linguistic and mental turning point that will leave no stone of the old grammatical and social system unturned. Gone are the days of Wittgenstein's much-quoted commandment of reticence, according to which: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Today we are witnessing a scenario in which the political loudmouths dominate and are being heard. Forced violations of the rules are competing against cosmetic linguistic corrections – and the race's outcome remains uncertain.

At the beginning of the recent destructive language-pandemic stands the former US president. He deliberately smashed all the previously halfway valid norms and rules of linguistic and social interaction and elevated lying to an art form suitable for the masses. With a few bold sentences, he burst the dam between lies and truth, facts and fictions, fairness and foot-kicks that had been debated again and again by countless philosophers, theologians, moralists and linguists. Some were shocked, some were speechless, many were amazed, hardly anyone interrupted him to any notable degree. Quite a few even learned from him. They understood that the legs of the "bigger lies,"[11] to quote Erich Fried, are amazingly long and can take you far – often all the way to the talk shows.

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[11] Erich Fried: Die Beine der größeren Lügen [The Legs of the Bigger Lies].

The protagonists of this process instinctively recognized that the concept of "fake news" is operationally superior to faithful obsession with truth and solid research – in keeping with the motto: the little bit of reality I need I produce myself.

XII "Human Rights Fundamentalism"

Resistance began to form almost simultaneously through the years to this ruthless, chauvinistic, and violent form of linguistic ingression – or, actually, transgression. A first event took place in 2017, when a poem by the father of Concrete Poetry, Eugen Gomringer, which (until then) seemed almost innocent, was believed by activists to contain an intolerable sexist and misogynist provocation. At the end of the debate, the poem was taken down from the wall of the building in Germany that it adorned. What began as a bizarre anecdote has since grown into a systematic storm of iconoclasm sweeping away both images and words.

The regulations of the MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements have been put into place and increasingly become linguistic reality. Verbal and conceptual stumbling blocks have been – and continue to be – systematically erected, with the more than justified aim of clearly pointing out social grievances, such as oppression, inequality and abuse. Branding this "linguistic Jacobinism" seems to me more than inappropriate. Perhaps it makes sense to suspend the usual flow of language for a time in order to initiate an urgently needed process of change. Anyone who is even superficially familiar with social media's voices and moods cannot help but notice that, to be somewhat consistent, this step was and is necessary.

Of course, one cannot help but notice that the consolidation and occasional hardening of the new doctrine has also resulted in a dire increase in aggression from those who do not – or do not yet – share these views. Even the pause in the middle of the word that speakers have been advised to make when pronouncing the German names of certain occupations to make them gender neutral is perceived as senseless harassment by more than just a few. Or is countered with the argument that "it won't make the world a different or better place." Quite a few people feel thoroughly provoked by the constant partition into the correct or incorrect. According to the opponents of reform, these labels and prohibitions are precisely what give rise to the processes of division and stigmatization that we are supposed to be combatting in the first place.

I am emphasizing this relatively strongly in order to warn of the danger of society's gradually drifting apart, a danger of which these changes are certainly emblematic. One needs to be hyper-careful that warning signs do not become red flags. And one should recognize that artificial regulations and the bending of language do not necessarily correct the flaws in the system, but can exacerbate them. Toppling monuments, frantically renaming streets, engaging in a kind of ideological iconoclasm, brings with it the danger of a new fundamentalism. After all, whoever toys with our linguistic and visual traditions intervenes massively in the social fabric. And one is not necessarily in good company when doing so. To black out "words," to obscure, to paint over, to excise them, is a familiar endeavor in totalitarian systems.

XIII Lost Contexts

There is another danger that needs to be discussed: the loss of all playfulness, humor and irony. Lately, there have been almost nothing but head-on ideological collisions. And both sides – one can't help but speak of "sides" or parties – seem trapped in their own patterns. Even literature is

scoured and canceled according to the taxonomies of gender justice or racial correctness – a dangerous and portentous step.

Some works are now to be performed only in edited form, others are disappearing completely, the canon is being demonized as a white, male invention. Instructors and directors avoid potentially problematic plays and texts. Cultural memory develops holes, contexts are lost. A purified, germ-free world emerges, as if cleansed by an AI. Following this logic, one could come to the conclusion that Shakespeare's work, full to the brim with ambiguities, allusions, jokes, and transgressions, should be removed from public libraries or kept there only in a partially blacked-out state, preferably in a separate storeroom – which is indeed already being considered in some places.

When one blacks out books, one also decolorizes people ... and we do not want to end up there. One side insists on differences and fills the air with identitarian "bunk." The other side skirts around all differences and pretends they do not exist. Club or mask, there seems to be nothing in between. Thus, the state of language grotesquely reflects the overall state of a society permanently poised to defend or attack. Where is there room for criticism, rationality, shades of gray? There are no Orwellian language police chastising us, we have long been controlling ourselves. We no longer need higher authorities to defuse, bleach and sterilize language. Language cleaners of all genders – driven by an imaginary norm of political correctness – are scouring the landscape and eradicating anything growing without permission. Last exit: lukewarm gender justice, specious correctness, pseudo-neutrality and impersonality. Much more is in danger of being lost than the often-invoked desire for "orderly discourse."

The urgent order of the day is to vigorously defend the almost-lost third space of thinking and arguing critically in context, and to put extremists on both sides in their place. Not through a cosmetic bending of language or its prohibition, but by working on oneself. The linguistic aberrations are not the cause, but only the reflex, the sign of our behavior. Only when we change, does our language change as well. A society that learns to think less in ideological patterns, but to trust again its own critical and self-critical perceptions, instead of following the latest slogans and doctrines like lemmings, would automatically speak a different language. A language in which terms like "balance," "understanding" and "compromise" would not be synonymous with weakness. And in which laughter would once again have its place.

It is said that the French philosopher Michel Onfray exaggerates excessively in his *Théorie de la dictature* (Theory of Dictatorship) when he puts forward the idea that all our freedom is threatened by a digital surveillance capitalism that has joined forces with left-wing political correctness. No, this is not an attempt to detonate a conspiracy theory. It might be, however, that the worst-case scenario is already being played out experimentally – in the relatively harmless area of language rules: ongoing experiments that are proving successful. Opinions are formulated, agreements established, certain discourses promoted, others rejected – ah, yes: forbidden. The writer Françoise Giroud predicted this possibility 20 years ago:

> This is how fascism begins. It never says its name, it crawls, it swims, and when it shows his face, we say: Is that it? Do you really believe that? You shouldn't exaggerate! And then one day, there it is, stuck in front of our face, and it's too late to get rid of it.[12]

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[12] Françoise Giroud. Journal d'Une Parisienne 3 [Diary of a Parisienne 3].

Do we find ourselves, as permanent verbal mask-wearers, poised on the verge of this experience? Neutralized, anonymized, staggering sedated through a pleasantly germ-free, brave new world, smiling gender-neutrally, robbed of our voices, hampered by paralyzed wings and lacking any humor whatsoever?

XIV Instead of a Conclusion: The Cassandra Syndrome

I fear some readers may have gained the impression that doom and gloom have won out. The opposite is true. Properly understood and used, language can remedy and assist. Admittedly, one cannot take it for granted or view it as self-evident. It's a bit like democracy: it has to be worked out every day yet again. To quote Büchner one last time: "The form of government must be a transparent garment that clings tightly to the body of the people."[13]

This applies just as much to language. Everyone would do well to permanently distrust their own linguistic creations. *Freiheitsenergie* (freedom energy) – introduced into the German discourse to denote non-Russian energy sources, this is a term that immediately captivates and triggers spontaneous applause. And yet it's miles away from the still-rather-modest current reality. And yet it's still much closer to reality than cynically using "military operation" to denote brutal carnage.

Nevertheless, each of these linguistic markers is a kind of indicator. When language develops such conspicuous creases, it points to a hidden danger. It signals an anomaly and forces us to reflect. Makes us pause. Positioned at the interface of fiction and reality, it is the crucial phase of our perception. If we take it seriously, i.e. really let it touch us, it helps us decipher even the most complex situations and constellations.

That is why I spoke of the Cassandra Syndrome. If we force ourselves to stop at this moment and register the irritation, the blurriness, instead of drowning it out, much is gained. After all, language is the best instrument we have at our disposal for sensing reality. By creating reality rather than simply depicting it, it empowers us to act. John Austin's seminal work *How to Do Things with Words* from 1962 remains valid to this day.

In the age of communication, digitization and social media, we have technology at our disposal that we must use. Complaints about "digital dementia" should be offset by a positive counter-vision. Instead of complaining about the neglect of language, all government and public institutions should become part of a broad cartel, one that promotes a transparent language culture which clings tightly to the body of democracy. One first small step towards achieving this goal could be renouncing any form of bureaucratic encryption and not hiding under the camouflage net of prevailing formalisms and clichés. One can practice this and one should practice this.

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[13] Georg Büchner. Dantons Tod [Danton's Death].

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