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Languages – Cultures – Thought

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About the Author

Rolf Elberfeld, born 1964

1983-1989	Study of philosophy, Japanology, history of religion and Sinology at the University of Würzburg
1989-1991	Research scholar of the Japanese Ministry of Education at the state university of Kyōto/Japan (Mombushō-stipend)
1992-1995	doctoral scholar in the post-graduate programme "inter-cultural religious and religion-historical studies" at the University of Bonn
1995	doctorate in philosophy at the University of Würzburg under Heinrich Rombach: *Kitarō Nishida und die Frage nach der Interkulturalität*
1995-1997	habilitation scholar in the post-graduate programme "inter-cultural religious and religion-historical studies" at the University of Bonn
1997-2003	scientific research assistant at the philosophy department of the University of Wuppertal
2002/1	Venia legendi in the philosophy department with the paper: *Dōgens Phänomenologie der Zeit und die Methoden komparativer Philosophie*
2002/2	*Straniak-Philosophie-Preis* 2001 for the habilitation paper
2002/6	*Karl-Jaspers-Förderpreis* for philosophy from the Niedersachsen foundation
Since 2002	instructor at various universities
2008	guest professor at the University of Zürich (summer term)
2008/6	professor for cultural philosophy at the University of Hildesheim

Book Publications

1. Kitarō Nishida (1870-1945). Das Verstehen der Kulturen. Moderne japanische Philosophie und die Frage nach der Interkulturalität, Rodopi: Amsterdam 1999.

2. Denkansätze zur buddhistischen Philosophie in China. Seng Zhao – Jizang – Fazang zwischen Interpretation und Übersetzung, Rolf Elberfeld, Michael Leibold, Mathias Obert, Edition Chora: Köln 2000.

3. Phänomenologie der Zeit im Buddhismus. Methoden interkulturellen Philosophierens, Frommann-Holzboog: Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2004.

Editions

1. Komparative Philosophie. Begegnungen zwischen östlichen und westlichen Denkwegen, ed. by R. Elberfeld, J. Kreuzer, J. Minford, G. Wohlfart, Fink-Verlag: München 1998.

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4. Japanische Perspektiven auf Europa, in: Europäische Identität: Paradigmen und Methodenfragen, ed. by R. Elm, Baden-Baden 2002, 291-308.

5. Heidegger und ostasiatisches Denken. Annäherungen zwischen fremden Welten, in: Heidegger-Handbuch, ed. by D. Thomä, Stuttgart 2003, 469-474.

6. Einteilung der Künste in interkultureller Perspektive, in: Polylog. Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren, no. 9, 2003, 57-64.

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8. Phänomen "Menschlichkeit" zwischen Asien und Europa, in: Zukünftiges Menschsein: Ethik zwischen Ost und West, ed. by R. Elm and M. Takayama, Baden-Baden 2003, 423-442.

9. Sensory Dimensions in Intercultural Perspective and the Problem of Modern Media and Technology, in: Technology and Cultural Values. On the Edge of the Third Millennium, ed. by P. Hershock, Hawaii 2003, 478-492.

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14. Zur Handlungsform der "Muße". Ostasiatische Perspektiven jenseits von Aktivität und Passivität, in: Paragrana. Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie, 16:2007, vol. 1, topic "Muße", 193-203.

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18. Durchbruch zum Plural. Der Begriff der "Kulturen" bei Nietzsche, in: Nietzsche-Studien, 38, 2008.

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Educational Objectives

This study text is intended to sensitise one for one's own language, the structure of foreign languages and the connection between language and thought.

As there is hardly any knowledge present about the language variety within and outside of Europe, in the first part the question will be put of language in general, in order to delineate what forms of language are treated in the study text. Then, with select overviews and information, some basic knowledge is imparted of the language variety in the world, in Europe and in Germany, as well as of the major "language families".

In the second part, with the basic positions of major philosophers, the connection of thought and language is elucidated, in order thus to emphasise the philosophical relevance of the topic especially for the cultural sciences. It is above all the approaches of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Nietzsche that will be drawn into the foreground with regard to an interculturally oriented thinking of language.

In the third part, certain seminally powerful languages (ancient Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese) are introduced and contrasted with respect to their basic grammatical structure and their writing system. In this part the question of grammar and its significance is opened, in order to gain reference points for a comparative perspective.

In the fourth part the questions that arose in part 2 are developed more concretely with selected grammatical phenomena – the question of the subject, the verb's voice, the grammatical tenses – and an especially conspicuous lexical field in the Chinese and Japanese languages. In this part the treatment sways back and forth between linguistic and philosophical modes of access, the focus being on examples from the region of grammar that are especially significant for contemporary philosophy.

Language is the central medium for any science. Especially in the cultural sciences and humanities this medium plays a fundamental and commanding role, one that is seldom noticed, as the medium's structures themselves are not rendered transparent. In order to increase the degree of reflection in these sciences in the frame of a globalised world, an intensive treatment of language and languages beyond the European region is necessary. This study textis concerned with this very sort of increase in intercultural competence and sensitivity in the way of language beyond the boundaries of Europe.

The course contains complementary practice exercises with which the student can confront his or her own preconceptions and work out his or her own independent preparatory approach to the themes and considerations that begin each chapter.

General Reading Recommendations

1. Apel, Karl-Otto: Die Idee der Sprache in der Tradition des Humanismus von Dante bis Vico, Bonn 1963.

2. Arens, Hans: Sprachwissenschaft. Der Gang ihrer Entwicklung von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart, Frankfurt a.M. 1974.

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12. Lohmann, Johannes: Philosophie und Sprachwissenschaft, Berlin 1965.

13. Reinhard, Wolfgang: Sprachbeherrschung und Weltherrschaft. Sprache und Sprachwissenschaft in der europäischen Expansion, in: Humanismus und Neue Welt, ed. by W. Reinhard, Weinheim 1987, 1-36.

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Introduction

Have you ever learned a foreign language so long and so well that you thought and dreamt in it? Or was learning French and Latin rather an excruciating experience, the foreign language resisting every attempt to learn to use it freely and fluently? What experiences do you associate with your own mother tongue? Were you ever desperate because you could not make yourself understood in a foreign language, because you could only think of the proper words in your own language, and not in the language learned? Have you ever noticed that with the change to another language your posture, body language and tone also changes? Do you know persons who grew up bilingual, and can change freely from one language to the other?

Language and language variety

Everyone who is capable of learning a language is connected existentially with a language, or perhaps several languages. Usually we are compelled every day to make use of language in order to proclaim our own wishes, to impart our knowledge, to support persons in various situations, or to find our way in our own experiences. Language is a basic element of life for the majority of all humans. The mother tongue itself, though, has become such an unquestioned matter of course over the course of time that we have hardly formed any consciousness of its structure and workings. Only in situations in which we lack the right words and misunderstandings arise, we must learn new connections or contexts, or have to present ourselves in a special way lingually does the language itself arise out of its unconscious self-evidence before us in adulthood, confronting us with questions never asked before. The questions multiply, when we start to learn a new language. As long as the language in question is German, French or Latin, we usually find a bridge to the English language quickly, their structures and vocabulary being quite similar. Only when the attempt is made to learn a non-European language such as Hebrew, Hindi, or Chinese, can the experience expand how greatly languages can differ from one another in word and writing.

In comparison to past centuries, the coexistence of languages far removed from one another side by side in our society has become commonplace. It can therefore rightly be said:

"We live in the modern Babylon. Never before were so many languages spoken in Europe, stood so many different cultures in contact as today. But modern multilinguality in Europe is still a relatively small section of the world's cultural variety. The number of languages in the world has never been stable at any time. Continually languages are dying out, vital languages are asserting themselves, and new language variants are splitting apart."[1]

The reality of language variety is a factum that today not only determines international politics and business, but is permanently affecting many persons' everyday lives more and more. Especially in the world's larger cities it is possible that one finds oneself no longer able to place the language of passers-by, the language being none of the familiar neighbouring countries. And there are again and again situations in which no common spoken language can be found for a conversation. Even though English can often function as a bridge for those who do not share a native tongue, this is not always the case. In broad regions of South America, the French-

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[1] H. Haarmann, Kleines Lexikon der Sprachen. Von Albanisch bis Zulu, München 2001, 10 and 23.

speaking parts of Africa or in China English is in most cases no help at all. Even in the USA it may occur that the woman at the kiosk has no real command of the English language, because she runs her business mainly for Korean-speaking customers.

On the one hand, one may lament that we are not always able to find a common language with others in every situation. On the other, there lies hidden in the variety of human languages a wealth of experiences and world-interpretations of which we are usually not conscious, owing to our limited access to other languages. Studying different languages familiarises us with our own lingual boundaries on the one hand, and on the other, it also reveals the possibility common to all humans to learn to know oneself, other humans, and the world in and through languages.

The dealings with language and its function in rendering reality accessible plays into almost all areas of human life. Without embarking on far-reaching speculations on the origin of language, it can be asserted that humans' languages and cultures are most closely interconnected. The same is true of the regions of religion, philosophy, politics, science, technology and the political economy. Without lingual means, all these fields of reality could not unfold themselves in any higher differentiation. Language is a necessary condition of the development in all the regions mentioned; the variety of languages that confront one in all regions often gives rise to difficulties, though.

After first learning about the variety of languages, one has different possible ways of coming to terms with this variety. In politics, industry, and technology interpreters are employed, it being taken as read that the lingual contents can be translated. This can often be tested with the practical results. In religions individual languages often stand at the centre of revelation, or specific traditions. In this way languages can spread throughout the world together with religions, as is the case with the Arabic language. In other cases, religions are subject to change when they are connected with other languages in other cultural regions. A prime example of this is the transfer of Buddhism from India to China. In the sciences, especially in linguistics, a main issue is always the transcendence of the variety of languages to a level at which "universally valid statements" can be made, which are no longer limited by certain languages and their modes of expression. In the everyday commerce with persons, however, and in the area of science as well, there is only the possibility of finding a common language, without which a dialogue would not be possible. Extralingual "universal truths" cannot change this.

In European philosophy the language variety played no special role for centuries, as the European tradition of thought first settled into ancient Greek and **Universalisation vs. relativisation** then into Latin, and then separated thought cleanly from language. Only in the transition to modernity, after innumerable reports of other cultures and languages reached Europe, did one notice more and more that *language as a medium of thought* required more careful attention. Here, too, two strategies were noticeable: for one, there was an attempt to restrict oneself and concentrate on general laws of thought that promised to transcend all differences between the expressions in the various languages. And then it was also argued thought itself were connected with the structure of the individual language very deeply, so that the exploration of these structures itself must belong at the centre of philosophical effort.

The *universalising* and the *relativising* view of language and languages constituted the two main schools of research in the 20th century. The universalising view is especially closely associated with the name Noam Chomsky, whose research is concerned primarily with finding out the universal structures through which the human *faculty of language* is determined everywhere. The relativising view of language and languages is still associated with the names Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, who attempted to show that every language produces the world in itself anew, and that the languages' different worlds are thus incompatible. Both approaches appear at first sight irreconcilable, and have led repeatedly to bitter debates in the sciences.

In the following introduction to the topic "languages – cultures – thought", which is divided into two units, an attempt has been made to portray neither the one nor the other as the "right" view. It is presupposed, rather, that each of them has its own rightful claim to validity in its own respect, and that it is therefore reasonable and worthwhile not to allow them to solidify into a simple dichotomy, which has all too often proven fruitless in the past. It is most important then to indicate whether the explicit issue at hand is to emphasise the unity or the difference, although these two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It was Wilhelm von Humboldt above all who always kept both sides in view in his treatment of language. For this reason, his thoughts will be explicated in greater detail, and will provide a guideline for our exposition.

The entire presentation will move between a portrayal of the variety of languages, together with selected concrete examples, and their connection to different cultures and philosophy. We undertake neither a mere linguistic introduction nor a mere culture- and language philosophical investigation. Both the concrete reality of different languages and its significance for culture and thought shall be rendered clear. Thus, in the course of the text the perspective will be changed repeatedly, whereby the different levels will obtain a new kind of connection.

Practice Exercise 1

1. *Make a list of 20 languages!*

2. *Name, if possible, five different writing systems!*

3. *How many languages would you recognise just by hearing them, even if you do not understand them?*

4. *How high would you suppose the number of languages in the world?*

5. *How high would you suppose the number of languages in Europe?*