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Responsibility and Judgment, for What?
A Comment from a Benjaminian Perspective

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STANDISH'S PAPER: FROM PUTNAM VIA SCHOLEM/DERRIDA TO EDUCATION

The starting point of Prof. Paul Standish's paper 'One Language, One World: The Common Measure of Education' was Putnam's doubt about ethical universalism. The universalistic impetus in the Enlightenment possibly leads to a simplistic idea like 'one language, one culture, one education'. In order to disprove such an idea, Gershom Scholem's essay 'Confession on the Subject of Our Language [*Bekenntnis über unsere Sprache*] (Scholem, 1985; Scholem, 1986), dedicated to Franz Rosenzweig, and Jacques Derrida's exegesis of this text (Derrida, 2002b) was discussed. Scholem dismissed the secularisation and instrumentalisation of the sacred Hebrew in the Zionist movement. He warned of the 'abyss' opening up in the actualised Hebrew. Derrida dissociated himself from Scholem's contrasting scheme between 'an original purity' of name and its 'technological contamination' in mere signs (Standish, 2010). He focused on paradoxical traits in Scholem's argumentation: the possibility/impossibility of secularisation, and the Apocalypse as punishment/ rescue.

> It is, however, here most clearly that Derrida's thought moves away from Scholem to enable us to see how *the gap between the sacred and the non-sacred* can produce 'an experience of the edge, the edge of the abyss, between two places' that is precisely the space of responsibility and judgement (Standish, 2010).

Such a gap and abyss can arise in translation, which was a vital theme for Scholem, Rosenzweig and Derrida. 'Translation foregrounded in this way exposes something of the space of responsibility and judgement'.

The 'monolingualism' of dominant English, however, tends to close this 'space of responsibility and judgement', which is also the case in the area of education. The idea of 'one language, one culture' goes hand in hand with the tendency towards 'one education', observable in PISA, Bologna and bibliometrics. Common to all these endeavours is the worship of 'objectivity': 'the much-vaunted "objectivity" of exhaustive specifications of criteria covers over the space of responsibility, blocks the practice of judgement, on which culture and education ultimately depend'. To sustain the 'space of responsibility and judgment', we should 'look less at how we measure education and more at how our education is a measure of ourselves', and 'the originary force of language ... must run through education'.

Actually, I have almost nothing to complain about regarding the sound orientation Prof. Standish suggested for education: We should oppose to the idea 'one language, one culture, one education' and to alleged 'objectivity' as a criterion, and support the 'space of responsibility and judgement' and the 'originary force of language'.

My pedantic concern, however, cannot help but focus on a slight disruption in the line of argumentation. Dissociating himself from Scholem's intention to keep the sacred Hebrew pure, Derrida, nevertheless, is still concerned with 'the gap between *the sacred and the non-sacred*'. In the presentation, the place of the abyss is shifted to the void among secular, real-existing languages. We are no longer confronted with the abyss between the sacred and the non-sacred, but rather with the abyss between a dominant English and other languages. The disruption is slight but not to be ignored.

My questions are the following: Is it legitimate to reduce the argument of Scholem/Derrida to the horizon of real-existing languages? What might be disregarded as a result of this reduction? Are not the possibly disregarded perspectives something essential for a concept of education?

AN ANECDOTAL CASE OF LEIBNIZ

In order to illustrate the point, I would like to first show an anecdotal case: the case of Leibniz. It is well known that he attempted to construct a universal language. He is one of the most eminent representatives of the universalistic tendency in European thought. Ernst Cassirer (Cassirer, 2003) recognised in Leibniz, beside Descartes, a primary forerunner of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. On the other hand, Leibniz belongs to those rare European thinkers who were free from the alphabet-centrism that, I think, is much deeper rooted than even eurocentrism. Anne-Marie Christin observes:

> It is well known that the role of the writing within the thought of Leibniz and its development was particularly important. ... This philosopher-diplomat was in fact one of the very rare Europeans of his century who understood that Chinese writing was neither derivative of Hebrew or another "parent language" nor a distorted form of Egyptian hieroglyphics, ... but an ideographical language, ... he was convinced that it rested on the basis of the other nature than that of the alphabet (Christin, 2007, p. 100).

What was the motivation, if any, that moved Leibniz to open his imagination to a fundamentally different system of language? I would like to know whether such a vision would have been possible at all, presuming that he remained on the horizon that various languages constitute. Leibniz dreamed of reconstituting the Adamic language; he insisted on a non-arbitrary relationship between language and reality. Chinese writing appeared ideal to him to represent concepts directly in a language. The focus here lies in the semantic dimension in which language tends to go beyond itself. In such a semantic dimension the sacred could probably manifest itself.

SCHOLEM, DERRIDA AND BENJAMIN

Now I will go into the context of the discussion Prof. Standish mainly analysed, and try to place it within the perspective of Walter Benjamin. Like Derrida, and as Prof. Standish mentioned, Scholem's discussion in the Confession essay mentioned above was closely related to Benjamin's thoughts on language, including translation. This relationship is traceable in the two men's correspondence: in a letter written in May 1925 (Benjamin, 1997, p. 40), Benjamin referred to the letter from Scholem in which Scholem apparently revealed his idea that he would demonstrate in his Confession essay of 1926. According to Herzog: 'Scholem's confession to Rosenzweig was a result not only of Scholem's and Rosenzweig's argument on the future of Judaism but also of Scholem's ongoing correspondence with Benjamin'(Herzog, 2009, p. 228).

ON TRANSLATION

From Scholem to Benjamin: A Demand for Literalness and Fragments of a Vessel

The argument between Scholem and Rosenzweig addressed not only Judaism but also the probleme of translation. The theory of translation was one of the main themes of argument. They translated the same Hebrew poetry into German. According to Michael Brocke, who has compared both translations: 'Scholem is in the literal (*wörtlich*) rendering more exact, but shows weakness in rhyme and rhythm, and he also exceeds the number of syllables of the original. Rosenzweig deals more freely with the source, but keeps strictly the syllables' (Brocke, 1986, p. 137-138).

'Literalness [*Wörtlichkeit*]' was the principle Benjamin introduced in his essay 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers [The task of the translator]' in 1923. As a way of illustrating how such literal translation works, Benjamin employed the metaphor of fragments of a vessel:

> Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel (Benjamin, 1999b, p. 260).

A vessel, such as that which is imagined here, is—according to Derrida—'not the universal language in the Leibnizian sense', but 'the being-language of the language, tongue or language as such' (Derrida, 2002b, p. 131). I will return to this point later.

From Benjamin to Derrida: The Possibility or Impossibility of Translation?

What Benjamin conceived as 'translation' differs radically from the usual concept of translation as a reproduction of the original meaning in another language. But he thought translation to be entirely possible. Regarding this point, Derrida apparently shifts the focus in his detailed interpretation of Benjamin's essay on translation, 'Des Tours de Babel', from the possibility to the impossibility of translation.

According to Derrida, even '[the] pure transferability' of the sacred text does not mean that it is translatable: 'Never is there anything more transferable, yet by reason of this indistinction of meaning and literality, the pure transférable can announce itself, give itself, present itself, let itself be translated as untranslatable'. (Derrida, 2002a, p. 132).[1]

In contrast to Derrida's interpretation, Benjamin emphasises in the last part of his essay the translatability of the sacred text:

> Where the literal quality of the text takes part directly, without any mediating sense, in true language, in the Truth, or in doctrine, this text is unconditionallly translatable (Benjamin, 1999b, p. 262).

In the background of this latent conflict between the two philosophers may be their oppositional concepts of the relationship among languages. 'For Heidegger, Quine and Derrida, the radical difference among languages makes the fact at which every effort of translation finds its measure and limit'. For Benjamin, on the contrary, 'a kinship among languages delivers the connective link of his theory of translation' (Krämer, 2008, p. 177).

BENJAMIN ON LANGUAGE

Word, Name and Thing: Starting Point

How could Benjamin assume 'a kinship among languages'? In his early essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* [On language as such and on the language of man] in 1916 (Benjamin, 1999a), which constituted the theoretical basis of the entire development of his later thought, Benjamin supposed 'name-language (*Namensprache*)' as the common source of different languages. 'Through the word, man is bound to the language of things. The human word is the name of things' (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 69). Scholem shared such a concept of name-language ('Language is Name').

Behind Benjamin's concept of 'name-language' stood the myth of *Genesis* that God created things through his words. Benjamin presupposed this myth in his essay on language of 1916:

> ... in man God set language, which had served *him* as medium of creation, free. ...
> All human language is only the reflection of the word in name (p. 68).

Human language is based on name, and human beings are bound together with things through names because they share in the form of a name the word of God, which created things. In Benjamin's reliance on this myth we might recognise that the referential relation of language to the object is what we cannot explain within the language and that the sacred rightly takes place here.

Abyss of Judgment and of Immediacy: Situation after Babel

The relationship between language and the thing preserved in name-language, however, was lost through the Fall and through the linguistic confusion in Babel. Language became mere signs and means. An abyss in human communication opened up because language no longer had its basis in name, which binds language to the thing. In view of this situation, 'in exchange for the immediacy of name that was damaged by it [the Fall], a new immediacy arises: the magic of judgement' (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 71-72). But this 'magic' was never free from the abyss; it was a sort of linguistic compensation of the immediacy of the name:

> This immediacy in the communication of abstraction came into being as judgement, when, in the Fall, man abandoned immediacy in the communication of the concrete—that is, name—and fell into the abyss of the mediatedness of all communication, of the word as means, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle (p. 72).

Another operation to reconstruct the immediacy was the 'mystical linguistic theory', that is, 'the view that the mental essence of a thing consists precisely in its language', and 'the word is simply the essence of the thing'. This theory is 'the great abyss into which all linguistic theory threatens to fall' (p. 63). Benjamin rejected 'bourgeois linguistic theory', which merely legitimates the linguistic situation after Babel. But: 'the rejection of bourgeois linguistic theory by mystical linguistic theory likewise rests on a misunderstanding' (p. 69).

The Task of Translation

Neither the acceptance of mediatedness (bourgeois linguistic theory) nor the pursuit of immediacy (the magic of judgment or mystical linguistic theory) could avoid the abyss. In the face of this impasse, translation provided another way out. The 'vessel' whose fragments every translation tries to become, was called the 'pure' or the 'true' language, which was 'achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another' (Benjamin, 1999b, p. 257). Translations should show such a supplementing relationship among different languages. 'For the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language informs his [translator's] work' (p. 257). And: '… to regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux [*Sprachbewegung*], is the tremendous and only capacity [*Vermögen*] of translation' (p. 261).

It is obvious that the true (pure) language to be regained [zurückgewinnen] corresponds to the name-language Benjamin conceived in his Language essay of 1916 (Menninghaus, 1978, p. 56). In order to regain the name-language in which language is firmly bound to the object, we need translation and therefore the other language. In the Benjaminian perspective, translation in a horizontal relation between secular languages is not to be separated from a vertical relation to the sacred: the relation that is indicated in the semantic dimension of language, in 'a calling, a summons, an invocation' (Standish, 2010) from inside the language.

The envisaged true (pure) language is anything but what we can artificially or purposefully construct. In this respect, it is fundamentally different from the universal language in the Leibnizian sense. But we might find the same constellation here and there: the alterity of the other language can be taken seriously when the vertical dimension of the semantics, which demands language go beyond itself, is noticed within the language.

PERSPECTIVE TOWARD EDUCATION

Probably it is already apparent which direction I would like to suggest. I dare to propose, long after the 'linguistic turn' and in spite of a multi-cultural situation, the significance of the referential relation of language and of education. Reference to reality, I suppose, is also something essential to education. In nursing or teaching we cannot avoid showing our forms of life and hence referring to a supposed reality (Mollenhauer, 1983, p. 32). On the other hand, in the Benjaminian perspective discussed above, different languages come into relationship with each other through their reference to the object. Discussion or argument among people with different languages and cultures would remain pointless (*gegenstandslos*) and fail to emerge if they did not have any object (*Gegenstand*) to be discussed or argued about. By referring to reality, education constitutes a fundamental aspect of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic encounters.

The object of discussion, however, might never be entirely shared among people. For the semantic dimension cannot be completed within a single language, as Benjamin in his excessive theory of translation rightly suggested. The abyss can be opened up at any moment. Conflicts between different kinds of semantics are fairly described as abyssal because at stake here is not the discrepancy of opinions that could possibly be reconciled but rather the reality on which opinions rely. The space of responsibility and judgment would be significantly challenged and actualised at the edge of such an abyss in the vertical dimension.

The meaning of education is ambiguous at this point. Education could deepen the abyss by insisting on the supposed reality. Insofar, the 'measure *of* education' does not appear to be definitively reliable, even if we understand the genitive here in the sense that Prof. Standish advocated. But referring to the reality in education could, if it is embedded in a translational flux among different languages, contribute to introducing different kinds of semantics into a competing but supplementing constellation. In order to let 'the original force of language' run through education in this way, however, we need to give a more detailed consideration of the relationship between language and reference in education.

NOTE

1 Bergdahl accepts this interpretation as if it were the theory of Benjamin himself (Bergdahl, 2009).

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