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Wittgenstein, Whorf and Linguistic Relativity. Is There A Way Out?

> »If the lion could speak, we would not understand him.«
> (Wittgenstein, Philosophical Inverstigations)

In this paper I would like to outline two sorts of relativism concerning the relationship between language and meaning. They touch on the problem of whether languages are translatable into each other appropriately or not. In Wittgenstein we find strong connections of meaning to situational and quotidian contexts, and in his notion of »depth grammar«[1] below the surface grammar of each language he holds that it is the *use* of language that is interwoven with (cultural) forms of life that constitutes meaning. In Whorf, however, we see each grammar as comprised of a set of rules with a metaphysical background that discloses the typical worldview of how a people organizes perceptions into language, and this can be done quite differently by different languages. If this is the case, it would seem impossible for translation to ever wholly grasp what was meant by speakers with different backgrounds, and for translators to transfer meaning in a 1 : 1 process. Do translations *necessarily* produce misunderstandings? Are there intranslatables? If so, how might an understanding of ›the foreign‹ ever be achieved?

[1] See Wittgenstein, Philosophical Grammar, § 35: »›Understanding‹ is not the name of a single process accompanying reading or hearing, but of more or less interrelated processes against a background, or in a context, of facts of a particular kind.«, in: Wittgenstein, *Schriften*, vol. 4, and Kennick, »Philosophy as Grammar and the Reality of Universals«, in: Ambrose/Lazerowitz (ed.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Philosophy and Language*, pp. 140–145.

1. The Later Wittgenstein's Pragmatic View on Language

When Wittgenstein returned to philosophy in 1929 he had arrived at a different view on language than that originally laid out in his famous *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (TLP). Right at the beginning of his later »Philosophical Investigations« (PI) he compared language to an old town:

»A maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions, from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new borroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.« (PI § 18)

So »our language is a structural growth, not a construction drawn up according to a uniform plan.«[2] There is »nothing firm, given once and for all, nothing closed, no sharp boundaries« (PI § 23). Normal everyday language is the ground on which every meaningful social interaction happens: »What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand.« (PI § 118)

He had found fatal flaws in the logical and metaphysical theses of his former ideal language theory. Leaving behind his logical atomism, he had abandonned his picture theory of language that had maintained isomorphical relations between sentences and facts. But he was far from abandoning his notion of rule-following, only that in the TLP he thought that any language is a logical-syntactical calculus of rules, and he then turned to normal everyday language and all the activities that are connected with it. Ordinary everyday language had turned out to him not as somehow defective, but as fulfilling its purpose perfectly well. (He thus set in motion the so-called »pragmatic turn«.)

»He ceased talking of the calculus of language and instead began to talk of *comparing* a language with a calculus, a comparison which would reveal both similarities and differences. Subsequently he introduced the notion of a *language–game*, finding the analogies between speech and engaging in games, and between the rules of games and the rules of languages, more fruitful […]. He thus displayed a movement away from focusing on forms of expressions and their patterns of relationships towards concentrating on

[2] Specht, »The Language-Game as Model-Concept in Wittgenstein's Theory of Language«, in: Canfield (ed.), *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, vol. 6 (»Meaning«), pp. 131 f.

uses – away from viewing discourse as patterned arrays of symbols towards seeing speech as part of the web of human life, interwoven with a multitude of acts, activities, reactions and responses.«[3]

He now looked at the micro-structure of everyday language and discovered normative regularities: Language games like reporting an event, promising, praying, singing a song, commanding, questioning, telling stories, chatting, etc (see PI §25) are part of our natural history[4] and follow practical rules, and »this practice is a shared pattern of behaviour, the common property of a group or community of like-minded and consenting adults. In this view, calling ›following a rule‹ a ›practice‹ is meant to highlight the essentially social nature of what we call ›following a rule‹: It is necessarily a custom established in the activities of a group.«[5]

This is why Baker and Hacker speak of a »relativistic conception of objectivity«.[6] Thus meaning is not something internal in the mind that has to be expressed in language to be communicated. Neither is there a fixed semantical correspondance to any one notion or sentence that allows us to understand it. Wittgenstein saw

»the need of analyzing those very representational relationships between language and reality which are left unattended to both in the Tractatus and in logical semantics. They cannot be gathered just by observing the expressions of the language and by observing the world they speak of. Nor can they be read off from the mental contents of the language users. […] A vistor from Mars – or a child learning to speak – can only gather the meanings of our words from the behaviour of language users. The representional relationships between language and reality have as it were their mode of existence in certain rule-governed human activities. These activities are just what Wittgenstein calls language-games.«[7]

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[3] Baker/Hacker, *Wittgenstein. Rules, Grammar and Necessity*, pp. 38 f.

[4] op.cit., p. 170.

[5] ibid, p. 170.

[6] ibid., p. 171, see Hintikka, »Language-Games«, in: Canfield (ed.), *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, vol. 6 (»Meaning«), p. 247.

[7] Hintikka, op.cit., pp. 110 f.; Dancy, »Alien Concepts«, in: Klemke (ed.), *Essays on Wittgenstein*, p. 323 gives a striking example: From an outside perspective (say Mars) the use of the word ›clear‹ may not be clear at all, because »we speak of clear days, clear soups, clear complexions, clear voices, clear presentations. A paraphrase that suits one of these does not in general, suit the others: clear voices are not blue-skied and cloudless, clear presentations are not ones free of acne […]. We have to look for the linguistic context which is connected to use, in order to understand the meanings.«

We cannot think language-games without their linguistic and situational context (including criteria, circumstances, consequences, roles, patterns, services, etc.).[8] And thus by his philosophy of normal everyday language Wittgenstein gave rise to the development of a new science: linguistics.

For Wittgenstein, the whole of language and all activities connected to it, may be called »language game« as well. (PI §7). It is bound into the total life and action and is closely connected with the whole form of life of the linguistic community. But these ›language games‹ cannot be defined by a common property, say rules (there are games without rules). Here Wittgenstein found a middle way between essentialism and nominalism:

»Don't think of language having an essence. It is made up by a number of different language-games. These phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, – but […] they are *related* to one other in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship that we call them all ›language‹.«[9]

According to Hintikka language games are not games *in* language, but they are games played *by means of* language,[10] and they are accompanied by nonverbal behaviour and activities.

»Language is an instrument: Its concepts are instruments« (PI 569). But we grasp a rule by grasping »the correlated language-game, not *vice versa:* We thus cannot introduce new language games« by explaining their rules, »for these rules can only be appreciated by mastering the underlying game.«[11]

So if we look at the three dimensions of semiotics, it is no longer a matter of considering formal syntactical structures of language, nor an isolated semantics, nor pragmatics as a mere practical application of what has been clarified before, but Wittgenstein identifies two levels of semiotics: »Language is not only meant as a system of linguistic signs, but also includes all the activities belonging to the use of this sign-system, and thus »language is an activity penetrating all forms

[8] Binkley, *Wittgenstein's Language*, p. 30.
[9] David Bloor, *Wittgenstein. A Social Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 30 f., quoting Wittgenstein, PI §65.
[10] ibid, p. 114.
[11] Hintikka, ibid, p. 123.

of life«, and cannot be separated from them, »nor can it be regarded as an isolated structure.«[12]

(»What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life.«) (PI §23)

This pragmatic view made Wittgenstein look at other possible uses of language under different conditions and other forms of life, that may constitute different meanings (»to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life«) (PI §19), but there has to be »a certain communality in behaviour as a precondition for understanding a foreign tribe's tongue.«[13]

It is even possible that other forms of life lead to different concepts and classifications of reality.[14] »Ich will sagen: eine ganz andere Erziehung als unsere könnte auch die Grundlage ganz anderer Begriffe sein.«[15] So even concept formation can be relative to different forms of life, and understanding in regard to different languages will be more difficult if we do not share some forms of life. This is not the case between lions and men who come from very different forms of life, but perhaps easier between different cultures which share *some* forms of life, even if their languages are different. But even if we believe to master the language of a foreign country there can be barriers to understanding whenever we find totally strange traditions and habits. »The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.« (PI §206)

Translators have to know these systems of reference, otherwise they cannot fulfil their task appropriately.

»In short, men in different epochs, different cultures, have different forms of life. Different educations, interests and concerns, different human relations and relations to nature and the world constitute different forms of life.«[16]

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[12] see Specht, op.cit., p. 137, 140.

[13] ibid., p. 121.

[14] Bambrough, »Universals and Family Resemblances«, in: Pitcher (ed.), *Wittgenstein. The Philosophical Investigations*, p. 202 introduces an imaginary tribe of South Sea Islanders that classify trees according to their purpose as »boat-building trees, house-building trees«, whereas we are used to classify according to morphological characteristics into species and genera as our botanics do. So we might see a mixed planatation, where they do not see one.

[15] Wittgenstein, Zettel §387, in: *Schriften* 5, pp. 289 ff.

[16] Baker/Hacker, op.cit, p. 243.

And we can never understand their language without knowing about these backgrounds that may even constitute different rules of speech activities.

As Wittgenstein himself put it: »Wir haben hier eine Art Relativitätstheorie der Sprache vor uns. (Und die Analogie ist keine zufällige.)«[17]

2. The ›Private Language Argument‹ and Some Implications

Within our speech communities we have to adhere to the given rules and use the agreed concepts to be understandable: But »what we call following a rule in language is not following orders. That is we talk of ›taking part‹ in a language – the language is not any one man's doing more than another's, and the rules, if they are rules of language, are not one man's rules. This is essential for understanding.«[18]

Can there be languages that are strictly private?

Wittgenstein's reflections on a language about colour sensations and sensations of pain are meant to show that there cannot be a private language as mere expression of internal feelings, for meaning and use of notions are nothing private. As distinct from external objects which we can point at when we name them, here we have nothing observable from the outside, only signs in behaviour that lead us to assume that a person might be in pain. We may, from and within ourselves, use a sign, say E, and whenever the same sort of pain comes back, use this sign to denote it. But can we recognize it as ›pain‹ ? Can we recognize and distinguish different sorts of pain? If we are not part of the language games that give us a notion and general concept of ›pain‹ (including names for different sorts of pain), how can we describe our sensations as such, even to ourselves? (See PI § 202, § 243, 258, 265) If Robinson Crusoe (an example that Wittgenstein uses himself in his preparatory work for the *Investigations*) had been »left alone on his island while still an infant, having not yet learned to speak«, he may have recognized many things on the island (adapting

[17] Wittgenstein, *Early Manuscripts* MS 109, quoted acc. to the Hintikkas (p. 46), who had access to Wittgenstein's unpublished early manuscripts in Helsinki. See also Wittgenstein, PI II, p. 568.

[18] Rhees, »Can there be a Private Language?« in Pitcher (ed.), op.cit., p. 249.

his behaviour to them) and may have given them names. For Ayer, it is not inconceivable that Crusoe might have invented his own language, even one which is capable of describing his inner sensations.[19] But would such a Robinson be able to communicate his inner experiences on Freitag's arrival?

Wittgenstein's famous Private Language Argument has been discussed largely and very controversially even among Wittgensteinians, with regard to its meaning as well as to its function and purpose in the whole of Wittgenstein's thought. For Kripke, the real argument starts in §202: »Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ›privately‹: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same as obeying it«, and he connects the argument to Hume's sceptical paradox,[20] which Baker and Hacker call »perverse« and »distorted«.[21] Rush Rhees contradicts Alfred Ayer, as to the precise nature of the problem. (Ayer sees no difficulty in private languages: why couldn't we refer to our own inner experiences? Rhees answers by pointing out that neither the bull – not being part of the human speech community – knows what ›red‹ is, nor the parrot what ›language‹ is, because they do not get the meaning from »the kind of social life people with languages do have.«[22])

After Wittgenstein had ended up in solipsism at the end of the TLP he now shows that we would not even be able to name inner experiences. Thus solipsism in regard to language acquisition turns out to be nonsensical.

Like Quine, Wittgenstein rejects the notion that inner ›ideas‹ or ›meanings‹ may guide our linguistic behaviour. But the difference is that

> »Quine bases his argument from the very outset on behaviouristic premises. He would never emphasize introspective thought experiments in the way Wittgenstein does, and he does not think of views that permit a private inner world as in need of elaborate repetition. For Quine the untenability of any such views should be obvious to anyone who accepts a modern scientific outlook. Further, since Quine sees the philosophy of language

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[19] Ayer, »Can there be a Private Language?«, in: Pitcher (ed.), op.cit., p. 259.
[20] Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, p. 4.
[21] Baker / Hacker, *Scepticism, Rules and Language*, p. 23, p. 44.
[22] Ayer, »Can There be a Private Language?«, pp. 252–262; Rhees, »Can there be a Private Language?«, pp. 277, both in: Pitcher (ed.), *Wittgenstein. The Philosophical Investigantions*, pp. 251–266 and 267–285.

within a hypothetical framework of behaviouristic psychology, he thinks of problems of meaning as problems of disposition to behaviour.«[23]

Wittgenstein's perspective is different: thinking about and communicating inner, private and subjective experiences and sensations is only possible – even within oneself – if one has concepts at hand that originate from commonly accepted language games that give meaning to notions and allow for distinctions. And we can only feel them as such if we can distinguish them from similar sensations.

But to me there is yet another important aspect of this private language argument that should be raised here: If someone is able to communicate inner sensations, say of pain, in an accepted language, how can we be sure that we understand? Inner sensations differ from outer objects: We will never be able to say if the sort of pain (s)he feels is the same as we would feel in this situation. We can only infer from outer signs or suppose that (s)he feels the same toothache in the same way as we would do or have done. But we will never know for sure.

Malcolm has called this problem »Knowledge of other Minds«.[24] Thomas Nagel, surely influenced by Wittgenstein, writes a chapter on »Other Minds,« in German more precisely translated as »Das Phänomen des Fremdpsychischen«.[25] And in his famous essay on what it would be like to be a bat he maintains that even if we could know exactly the bat's (or another foreign being's) brain processes, we would never be able to know from the inside what it is like to *be* a bat (for instance with a different sensory perception – ultrasound – that allows for flying without really seeing). In the same essay he transfers this argument to humans that do have different sensory perceptions – colour-blind people, for instance.[26]

We can now easily transfer this argument to cultures as forms of life: Even if we have acquired much knowledge about a foreign culture and its language, we will normally never know from an interior perspective what it is like to *be* a member of this culture and this speech community.

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[23] Kripke, op.cit. ch. 3.

[24] Malcolm, »Knowledge of Other Minds«, in: Pitcher (ed.), *Wittgenstein, The Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 371–383.

[25] Nagel, *What does it all Mean?* p. 19; German: *Was bedeutet das alles?*, ch. 3

[26] Nagel, »What is it Like to be a Bat?«, first in: *Philosophical Review* 83/4.

Wittgenstein himself criticized such an external perspective on ›primitive people‹ in »Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough«,[27] where the latter ridicules magical traditions by measuring them at his own standards of scientific norms and thus does not in the least try to understand their meaning. Wittgenstein in turn proposes to reduce scientific hypotheses to »pure description«.

Peter Winch, who transferred the Wittgensteinian notions of ›forms of life‹ and ›rule- following‹ to the social sciences, especially to social anthropology, wanted to foster research on different cultures.[28] He believed that there are a number of theoretical problems in social sciences which cannot be resolved by empirical methods, but rather by concept clarification: »explanations of human behaviour must appeal […] to our knowledge of the institutions and ways of life which give its acts their meaning.«[29] And he neglects Durkheims principle of scientific description (»traiter des faits sociaux comme des choses«), maintaining that identification of social behaviour, even those of foreign cultures, should be done from an objective point of view free of any subjective pre-knowledge and evaluations. Quite on the contrary Winch even goes beyond Wittgenstein and his request for »pure descriptions« and asks for descriptions of foreign cultures that must be achieved by means of terms, concepts and criteria that stem from within this foreign culture itself: »It is not open to him arbitrarily to impose his own standards from without. In-so-far as he does so, the events he is studying lose altogether their character as *social* events.«[30] If we accept this point of view, understanding of foreign cultures would never be possible.

3. Whorf's »Principle of Linguistic Relativity«: Grammar and World View

In his essay »On the variety of human linguistic structures and their influence on the spiritual development of mankind« Wilhelm von Humboldt once declared: »Language is deeply intertwined with the

[27] Wittgenstein, »Bemerkungen zu Frazers ›Golden Bough‹«, in: Wittgenstein, *Vortrag über Ethik*, pp. 29–48.
[28] Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, p. 21.
[29] Winch, op. cit., p. 83.
[30] Winch, op.cit., p. 108. This is exactly what describes the method of Quine's field linguist.

spiritual development of humanity, at every level language accompanies the slightest local shifts back and forth, and every cultural condition can be recognised in it.«[31] Certainly Humboldt, quite idealistically, saw language as an emanation of the spirit, in which each time »has drawn out of itself its spiritual character, upon which it has impressed certain limitations.« And surely, »the spiritual character and the linguistic structure of a people participate in such a close internal fusion that when the one is present, the other must be able to be fully derived from it. For the exercise of the intellect and language establish and convey expressions which only serve to confirm one another. Language is, as it were, the outward appearance of the spirit of a people: their language is their spirit and their spirit is their language, one cannot envision strongly enough the identity between the two.« (ibid.)

And here above all one thing is being conveyed: the popular understanding that language is the expression of a previously developed thought. But what would that be: thought independent of language?

No matter how one muses over the origin of language, it is nevertheless true that we are all born into a specific language and linguistic culture, and learn to think in terms of the categories provided by that language, and indeed not only with regard to the terms we use for objects but also for those more complex structures, in and by means of which we articulate our thoughts. It is therefore not only the one spirit which each one of us articulates in different languages, but also the categories of our native languages, by which we learn to think. They offer us the structure through which we order our perceptions of the world and come to a perspective on the world that is often influenced by the structures of our native language. It is time, then, as one can already read in Catherine Fuchs' work, for a re-reading and rediscovery of Benjamin Lee Whorf's research into the anthropology of language.[32]

Whorf's linguistic research led him to live with indigenous people like Native American tribes and share their forms of life. His work on the Hopi language became particularly famous, although it led to

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[31] Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts.*

[32] Fuchs, »Diversité des représentations linguistiques: Quels enjeux pour la cognition?«, p. 10.

controversial discussion. Whorf however – who was exactly in the position of Quine's field linguist – tried to leave behind his own linguistic categories in examining indigenous languages. He discovered some very different grammatical structures that represented different worldviews to him.

Quite differently from Humboldt (although Humboldt is regarded as one of the early fathers[33] of the so-called »Sapir-Whorf-Hypothesis«) Whorf maintains:

»The world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our mínds – and this means largely by the linguistic system in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an unstated and implicit one. *BUT ITS TERMS ARE ABSOLUTELY OBLIGATORY.*«[34] (Whorf's emphasis)

And Whorf found a lot of empirical evidence for linguistic diversity: he reports for instance that in Vancouver there is a Native American language, Nootka, which expresses the processual nature of Being only by verbs and contains one word-sentences,[35] and that the Native American language which he himself researched intensively, Hopi, does not even use our time as a grammatical category: verbs cannot be conjugated into past, present or future tenses. The past and the spirits of the ancestors are still present in the present time, and the future begins to open up from here in the present. Two other grammatical forms are used to express these concepts of time, which Whorf indicates by »manifested« and »manifesting«.[36] (This evidence would seem to run counter to Chomsky's suggestion of a universal grammar.)

In addition, Whorf analyses the fact that one cannot say, in Hopi,

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[33] For Herder's teacher Hamann already, reason was relative to each spoken language, and the differences between languages correspond to variations in thought patterns, a theory which Herder continued to expound, and Humboldt later revived. According to Humboldt, a people's language is closely related to its »worldviews«. And it was the German Franz Boas who disseminated the thought of Herder and Humboldt in America and who became the teacher of Whorf's teacher Edward Sapir (who also came from Germany) (see Schlesinger, The Wax and Wane of Whorfian Views, p. 15.)

[34] Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, p. 213 f.

[35] op.cit, pp. 242 ff. and 258.

[36] Whorf, op. cit., p. 59. (chapter »An American Indian Model of the Universe«)

»Tomorrrow is another, that is to say, a new day«,[37] because it is always the same day, occurring again. And this is connected to a different notion of time: Whorf's analysis of the categories of time, for example, itemises cyclical notions of time (and they do not only occur in the Native American universe) which he contrasts to the Western linear, homogeneous concepts of time as a series of equivalent components. But this idea of time as a continuum of equally long years and days, hours and minutes is a mathematical abstraction, and the image of time's arrow was inspired, it is said, by Christian and Jewish notions of progress and hopes of salvation at the end of time.[38] Other representations of time and the passage of time were associated linguistically in this way, a topic which should be and has been a theme for intercultural research into the understanding of time and temporality.[39]

Whorf's thesis, the so-called »Principle of Linguistic Relativity«, now puts forward the idea that our thought structures are dependent on the grammatical categories provided by our native languages[40], which remain – often unremarked – so deeply embedded in the background of our consciousness that we take them for granted as universals. Whorf calls them a »system of natural logic«:

»According to natural logic, the fact that every person has talked fluently since infancy makes every man his own authority on the process by which he formulates and communicates. He has merely to consult a common substratum of logic or reason which he and everyone else are supposed to possess. Natural logic says that talking is merely an incidental process, concerned strictly with communication, not with formulation of ideas. Talking, or the use of language, is supposed only to »express« what is essentially already formulated nonlinguistically. […] Thought, in this view, does not depend on grammar; but on laws of logic or reason, which are supposed to be the same for all observers of the universe – to represent a rationale in the universe that can be »found« independently by all intelligent observers, whether they speak Chinese or Choctaw.«[41]

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[37] Whorf, op. cit., p. 148. Whereas we have flowing time and static space in Western thought, Hopis do not abstract from time, as in Bergson it is very subjective ›duration‹.

[38] vgl. Mall in Tiemersma /Oosterling, (ed.), *Time and Temporality*, p. 67.

[39] Tiemersma/ Oosterling, op.cit., pp. 65–74.

[40] See Gipper, *Gibt es ein sprachliches Relativitätsprinzip? Untersuchungen zur Sapir-Whorf-Hypothese*.

[41] Whorf, op.cit., pp. 207 f.

From such a perspective, this view of ›natural logic‹ also holds true of Leibniz' and Chomsky's theory of a universal logic or grammar that exists behind each particular language. According to their theories, all languages are based on a common logical structure which now can be identified as projections of the own grammatical or logical background onto other languages, thus generalizing and universalizing the own structures of language and thought. Therefore, translations declining from this common framework seem to present no difficulty and are always feasible. A linguistically idealistic view of thought (that is seen as independent of language) would view language as merely the external drapery of a universal grammatico-logical structure.

Projecting those structures which one takes for granted as being universally held by others is a way of thinking which is fatal for intercultural discourse, and which can quite rightly be misconstrued as a culturally imperialist attitude. In this sense it can be detected here too in the arena of written and spoken language, in which case real dialogue will remain impossible.

But this ›natural logic‹ is mistaken: one does not perceive that the »phenomena of language form, for the most part, a backdrop for the speakers' understanding which consequently remains outside of the realm of critical analysis. If one speaks according to his own natural logic about reason, logic and the laws of thought, (s)he would effortlessly follow the pure grammatical ›givens‹ which underlie his/her own language or the linguistic family to which it belongs, which of course do not hold for all languages or even form a general substratum of reason«. (ibid.)

If one does not know other forms of possible grammatical coinings, we can perhaps explain this reduced view with what Whorf describes as a »background phenomenon«: an imaginary tribe who by some physiological defect can only see ›blue‹ will never be able to know that there are other colours, and even cannot form a notion of what the meaning of ›colour‹ could possibly be. Their language would lack colour expressions, and they will remain convinced – not consciously of course – that seeing blue is universal.[42]

According to the linguist Benveniste, this is precisely the case with Aristotle. In the »Categories of Thought and Language«, Benveniste analysed the constraints within which the Greek language circumscribed the Aristotelian system of categorization: »It seems to us

[42] Whorf, op.cit., p. 209.

– and we will attempt to prove – that these differences are first and foremost categories of language, and that in his thought, Aristotle was simply reconstituting with a strict accuracy certain fundamental categories of his own language.«[43]

The same applies to the form of Indo-European sentences: The form of Aristotelian judgment, the foundation of its logic of propositions which later evolves into the logic of predicates, is »S is P«, wherein the relation of the concept of the subject to the concept of the predicate can take on various levels of significance through what is meant by »is«. On the one hand, it has the connotation of existence (on which point Kant was not the first to note that »being« is not a true predicate, but rather only a condition). On the other hand, it can signify identity or inclusion, and thus take on the logical function of a copula, which is, however, not present in all languages.[44]

»In addition *being* can, depending on the article, take on the function of a noun and be dealt with like a matter, and it can serve itself as a predicate. But we talk here of facts of language, of syntax. This should be emphasised, because it is due to just such a specifically linguistic situation that the entire Greek metaphysics of »being«, from the beautiful images of Parmenides' poetry to the dialectics of the Sophists, was able to emerge and come to full fruition.«[45]

To demonstrate that this is not the case everywhere, Benveniste chooses for the purpose of comparison the Ewe language spoken in Togo, in which »the concept of ›being‹, or that which we might describe in that way, is spread across several verbs.«[46]

Frederick Bodmer, in his »Loom of Language«, gives examples

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[43] Benveniste, *Probleme der allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*, p. 80. (see also Derrida, Das Supplement der Kopula. Philosophie vor der Linguistik, p. 198.)

[44] It is worth noting that not only was this argument of Benveniste's put forward two years earlier by the African philosopher Kagame in his »Philosophie Bantu-Rwandaise de l'être«, in fact something quite similar had already been discussed in a famous controversy as far back as the year 932. On the occasion of the translation of Greek philosophers into Arabic – which, like Hebrew and Russian, is a language without copulas – a debate took place between the logician Abu Bishr Matta and the grammatist Abu Said al-Sirafi about the universality of Aristotelian logic and the relative nature of grammar, in which the latter inveighed against the claims of Greek logic and philosophy (see the contributions of Mohamed Turki and Bachir Diagne in this book).

[45] Benveniste, *Probleme der allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*, pp. 86 ff.

[46] Benveniste, op.cit., p. 87.

for this missing copula from other languages, for instance in Chinese poems, and comments, quite in a Whorfian sense:

»Some of the difficulties of grammar are due to the survival of a pretentious belief that accepted habits of expression among European nations are connected with universal principles of reasoning, and that it is the business of grammatical definitions to disclose them. A complete system of logic which carried on its back the disputes of the medieval schoolmen started off with a grammatical misconception about the simplest form of statement. The schoolmen believed that the simplest form of assertion is one which contains the verb *to be*, and that the verb *to be* in this context has some necessary connexion with real existence.«[47]

Whorf's theories and his »principle of linguistic relativity« are not at all new;[48] it is just that they appeared at a point in time when relativity was »in« and people were particularly attentive to philosophy of language and ethnography.[49] Later however many argued on ideological grounds against both the concept of relativity and against Whorf.

As early as in 1846, Trendelenburg (and following him, Brunschvig) had already accepted Aristotle's ten categories as productions of language; and we might not take notice of the underlying structure, if we remain concerned only with the foreign languages within our own family of languages, those which Whorf calls the »SAE-languages« (»Standard Average European«). But if we move out to a consideration of other realms of language, we notice that the subject-predicate-object structure is typical of Indo-Germanic, or better, Indo-European languages, with an »acting subject and the object as the aim of the subject's activity.«[50] The concepts of ›subject‹ and ›predicate‹ don't actually work in many languages, including Japanese and Chinese.

And before Whorf, Weisgerber had discerned a »silent language«, an unspoken metaphysics conceptualizing the world in the linguistic-conceptual structures of many languages. On this point, he cites the linguist Hartmann: »After lengthy consideration, P. Hartmann comes to the conclusion that in Japanese, the concepts of subject, predicate, object are just as inapplicable as the concepts of noun

[47] Bodmer, *The Loom of Language*, p. 132.
[48] see footnote 43.
[49] Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 30.
[50] see Weisgerber, *Der Mensch im Akkusativ*.

or verb. […] While there is no evidence of a verbal Indo-Germanic expression which unites an act with a subject in such a way that the subject cannot be thought of without this relation, in Japanese these proceedings ›actually‹ can be seen and presented. It need not be the case that it be hidden within itself and closed and provides a complete picture indicating either its origin or its relationship to the environment. In addition, the term ›subject‹ is usually absent in Japanese, and the term ›object‹ should be understood as fundamentally different from the Indo-German use of that term.«[51]

In Japanese namely, one cannot speak of a predicate in the sense that *we* think of it. A sentence like »a small dog is barking«, in which the »predicate cannot be thought of except as being, that is, occurring fully under the influence of the subject«, in Japanese would be rendered in the opposite way, as *chiisai inu ga naku* »the barking of a small dog«. Here »an event is discerned in relation to an agent, although not presented as being caused by that agent. The agent is *the* participant because (s)he is also *the one* experiencing the action, and if (s)he dominates all the other content in the sentence, that is because of the predicate which stands for him/her in the main part of the sentence. It does not bear the stamp of the subject. It is just the main factor in the sentence, with which all the other things mentioned must agree.« One must keep in mind, however, that the Japanese »predicate« is not a verb in the Indo-Germanic sense.

»The Japanese verb is by its very nature a nominal image … The Japanese verb is by nature incapable of naming an event, of subordinating an acting subject, of serving as the vehicle of an action, or of applying its character as an action to an object … It is already a foregone conclusion that in Japanese one cannot speak of a subject, in our usual sense. […] The subject which is engendered in the event appears in the sentence under the attributes of the designation of the event; this appears not in the nominative case, but rather in the genitive«.[52]

The English phrase »a bird cries« corresponds to the Japanese *tori ga naku*, »a bird's call«. The bird is not presented as the originator of a deed, but rather as being the locus of an occurrence … It is not possible, linguistically, to extract the »doer« from the originating subject […] The same goes for the object: »I see the cherry blossoms« be-

[51] Hartmann acc. to Weisgerber, Die sprachliche Gestaltung der Welt.

[52] Hartmann, *Einige Grundzüge des japanischen Sprachbaus, gezeigt an den Ausdrücken für das Sehen*.

comes *wa ga sakura wo miru* = my seeing (of) the cherry blossoms, a relationship with the object, in the sense that we usually mean it, is not put forward: the cherry blossoms are not presented as the goal of the action, but rather as the locus of a perception.«[53]

We can see therefore that the described reflections on concepts like the SELF, BEING and TIME are correlated with particular grammatical forms in different languages: Thus, language is not only merely a means of expressing thought, which – independent of language – can be thought in the same way all over the world. Rather, language involves grammatical and lexical moulds of thought, each of which has a background metaphysics of which we are unaware, and which governs the worldview of each one. And this fact can lead to misunderstandings if ignored or overlooked.

4. Universalism or Relativism: Is there A Way Out?

Decades of research in linguistic anthropology have led to the conviction that the existence of some linguistic universals seems more and more improbable[54] (and even the classical two-valued logic does not seem universal[55]). Must we then, in consequence, adopt a total relativism by means of which our thought is determined by our different mothertongues? As we saw, relativism in Whorf is different from that of Wittgenstein. There is even a quarrel among Wittgensteinians, as to whether hinting at linguistic and situational contexts may be seen as relativistic at all.[56]

Do grammatical forms and situational linguistic contexts determine our minds and meanings, our ways of thinking inevitably and in in one certain way, such that we cannot escape their influence? If so, then no translation would be possible. Is there a total relativity between languages, if they provide different perspectives on the world,

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[53] Weisgerber, *Die sprachliche Gestaltung der Welt*, pp. 163–167.

[54] see Everett, *Linguistic Relativity. Evidence Across Languages and Cognitive Domains*.

[55] see Münnix, »Kontradiktion und Komplementarität. Ist die Logik universal?«, pp. 265–280.

[56] see for instance Ter Hark, *Beyond the Inner and Outer*, p. 39, who holds that relativity (and context sensitivity) does not automatically mean relativism, an opinion which Deloch takes over; whereas the Hintikkas, p. 41 f. discern an unrestrained relativism …

incorporating different worldviews according to their (metaphysically loaded) grammatical conventions? And according to the very different culturally dependent forms of life, in which languages are interwoven with activities in different situational contexts, and interwoven with cultural traditions? Is understanding from external perspectives possible at all?

So in my view two questions have to be answered: Do different languages cause different worldviews and determine thought in different ways, so that we will not be able to think otherwise? And secondly: If different languages represent the world differently, can there be relations between them at all?

We have to return now to the problem of universals in which, since medieval times, there have been two main and opposite positions: realism and nominalism, in English philosophy also designated as the controversy between essentialism and conventionalism. For what reason do we ascribe general concepts to very different phenomena in reality, say games, or chairs, or languages? Realists believed in the real existence of some sort of common essence in things that makes the application of general concepts to very different phenomema universally justified. Nominalists held that there was no such shared common nature of things, maintaining that language consists merely of names that we ascribe according to linguistic conventions. And we can imagine different conventions creating different concept meanings, as Wittgenstein in his thought experiments likes to present, which is why some have accused his later philosophy of being nominalistic. But Wittgenstein found a different solution, a middle way between essentialism and conventionalism, which has been viewed as a new solution of the problem of universals:[57] Games for instance do not share a common nature or essence, but they do have similarities and differences. They form a family, and this is why Wittgenstein picks up the Humean notion of ›family resemblances‹.[58]

»Don't say: ›There *must* be something in common, or they wouldn't be called games‹ – but look and see, whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see that there is something common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: Don't think, but look!« (PI § 66)

[57] see Bambrough, »Universals and Family Resemblances«.
[58] see Bambrough, ibid, p. 190.

The commonality between games (and languages) is not simply that they are *called* games (or languages), nor do they share a common essence (rules or (universal?) logic, for instance). They represent a complicated net of overlapping similarities and differences. Having »the Churchill face«, as Bambrough exemplifies, does not mean, that all members of the family have all of the typical characteristics in common (Roman nose, bushy brows, cleft chin, dark hair, high cheek bones, blue eyes, high foreheads, dimpled cheeks, pointed ears and ruddy complexion); – it suffices that some of them have some characteristics in common, and differ in others. Nevertheless, they are recognizable as a family in a family group photograph because of their relations to each other.)

There are very different relations between the members of a family, resemblances and differences. The same is true with games and with languages, and in spite of their differences they all belong to the same relational complex, a »cluster«.

Languages form families as well: For instance, Indo-European languages (or »Standard Average European«, SAE-languages, as Whorf calls them) have similarities in their grammar, according to linguistic research they all go back to the common root of Sanskrit and have developed from Indian to Greek via Latin into what we call today Germanic and Romanic languages, not leaving out Kurdish and Persian languages. Within these family clusters there are of course also differences, but these grow considerably if we compare members of this family to very foreign language families.[59] This does not exclude the fact that very foreign languages from different edges of one language family cluster seem to have no common property at all. Neither can we exclude the notion that very closely related languages of the same family may have quite different fields of concepts with different meanings and connotations. But we can hope for transitions.

With regard to the second question (of strong linguistic determinism) we can find a solution in Wittgenstein as well: In his early manuscripts as well as in his later lectures on the philosophy of psychology[60] he analyses the nature of actions, especially the nature of »rule-following« that had occupied him already in the TLP. For the explanation of actions Wittgenstein distinguishes between reasons

[59] see Bodmer, *The Loom of Language*, and Elberfeld, *Sprache und Sprachen*.

[60] See Ter Hark, *Beyond the Inner and Outer. Wittgensteins Philosophy of Psychology*.

and causes (and in the view of Ter Hark this is one of his greatest merits, because he finds a way between determinism and indeterminism[61]). We can explain social behaviour (following rules of linguistic traditions or conventions implies certain purposes) by giving reasons for doing so. But this is quite different from actions where we follow our own intentions. Here we can speak of *causation.* (In principle, Wittgenstein here goes back to the Aristotelian distinction between *causa finalis* (»Zweckursache«) and *causa efficiens* (»Wirkursache«), which explain actions into different directions, except that Wittgenstein would no longer call the first sort of explanation a ›cause‹. They now count as ›teleological‹ and ›causal‹ explanations.) And in his *Philosophical Grammar* he warns against mingling ›reasons‹ and ›causes‹:[62] Social linguistic behaviour is connected to certain purposes (»in order to be understood«), and we feel »guided« whenever following rules, but they do not *cause* our actions. Rule-following is somewhat automatical and involuntary, and does not depend on our own rational decisions. In contrast to this we can speak of causation whenever cause and effect of actions can be described independently of each other, if an individual will can be assumed:

»Wittgenstein's position seems to come down to a contrast between actions – or rather movements – which can only be explained and described via causes and actions which must moreover be described via reasons and motives, a contrast between involuntary movements and voluntary actions. The traditional contrast between actions with causes (determinism) and actions without causes (indeterminism) is thus cancelled.«[63]

This distinction was introduced into the social sciences by Peter Winch, who thinks that one should analyse social behaviour by producing descriptive investigations.

Without going into much more detail, we can maintain that rule-following is no causation in the strong sense of the word. We are not locked up in one language: There is no compulsion, indeed, there is even room for creativity: If we go back to Humboldt's most famous dictum that language is not an *ergon*, but *energeia* (it develops, it changes) we can even invent new language games. (As for example Heidegger, who found the German language not processual

[61] Ter Hark, op.cit., p. 263, and Deloch, op.cit., p. 73 (footnote 28).
[62] Wittgenstein, Philosophische Grammatik, in: *Schriften* 4, p. 101.
[63] Ter Hark, ibid.

enough, for which reason he then created verbs out of nouns: »es west«.)

We may perhaps imply a »soft« linguistic determinism, and Schlesinger even implies some sort of parallelism (linguistic-cognitive parallelism or linguistic cultural parallelism)[64].

But we must take into consideration that we grow up within one language which is handed down to us, which has a formative influence on us, and in which we learn to think, upon which, however, we can also have an influence. According to Wittgenstein, language is like railroad tracks: they come out of the past and have brought us this far, but we have to build them out from here into the future; and thus we may perhaps assume a dialectical interaction between language – thought – and language.

Clearly, there is a great variety of languages to be analysed which result in a multiplicity of thought patterns and even patterns of perception occurring through speech, which culminate in what John-Steiner calls »cognitive pluralism«. Whorf's most important legacy is perhaps »his unwavering engagement with linguistic diversity.«[65]

5. Untranslatability?

Nevertheless, we can maintain that there are metapyhsical presuppositions behind the ways in which languages organize experiences, and that meanings of words and sentences originate from their use in language activities. Even one single word can have different meanings when used in different contexts. These situational contexts are culturally dependent forms of life, and it is hardly possible for translators who have not shared these forms of life to get the exact meaning of what was being said, even if (s)he has vast theoretical knowledge of grammar and lexicon. Is it the case, then, that all translations are – in principle – inadequate?

In his conception of language, which he embeds into a general sign theory including nonverbal signs, Loenhoff discerns a dual problematic for translation: first »internal acts necessarily have to be translated or converted into external acts« and utterances, »in accor-

[64] Schlesinger, »The Wax and Wane of Whorfian Views«, p. 17.
[65] John-Steiner, »Cognitive Pluralism. A Whorfian Analysis«, p. 62.

dance with the available symbol systems of acceptable communication«. Then a further translational step must be taken into the realm of intercultural communication: external acts must »be translated anew into the linguistic and interactional context of the other culture in order to achieve any kind of understanding at all«.[66] But as we have seen in Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument, an internal language-free mental dimension in which we can name inner states independent of the common uses of languages by expressing them externally is hardly conceivable.

Rather we can assume two different (deconstructive) steps in translation: If translators do not project (often unconsciously) their own background assumptions, their habits and patterns of thought onto the other culture and language, translation is an experience of difference. So the first step of translators should be an attempt to deconstruct their own conceptual structures and habits as well as their own thought and speech patterns, in order to open up to a foreign culture and language as a different form of life. (This is why deconstruction is closely connected to the postmodern conception of ›*aisthesis*‹[67]). In a second step, a text or speech has to be deconstructed, analyzed into fragments,[68] in order to understand exactly (even in regard to situational linguistic and social contexts) what was meant. Only then, in a third step, can meaning be transferred into other linguistic and social contexts. For Derrida, this is a creative reconstitution (because there are choices to be made).[69] This reconstitution will not always be possible, there *are* untranslatables,[70] and already Wittgenstein remarked that there can be whole fields of notions that run counter to corresponding notions in other languages. And as Whorf shows, grammatical structures can lack in comparison to ours[71] or run along totally different lines.

In this situation, it was Walter Benjamin with his mystic conception of language who, after having translated Baudelaire's poems,

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[66] Loenhoff, *Interkulturelle Verständigung: Zum Problem grenzüberschreitender Kommunikation*, pp. 190 f.

[67] Münnix, *Zum Ethos der Pluralität*, p. 213.

[68] Derrida, »Des Tours de Babel«, pp. 189 f.

[69] Derrida, »Des Tours de Babel«, p. 199.

[70] see Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables*.

[71] Derrida, »Das Supplement der Kopula«, p. 223 shows up alternative ways of expressing the missing copula, for instance instead of »He is rich« (in SAE) »He rich he« in Altaic languages and in some oriental dialects.

spoke of an »unseizable more« of the original which will get lost in the target language.

In the unresolvable conflict between fidelity and freedom of translation (which would cause an assimilation to the target language) Benjamin votes for fidelity. Quite similar to Schleiermacher, he is convinced that true translations should be transparent and not cover the original. Rather they should reveal a foreignness in order to amplify and deepen one's own language, for languages complete each other by various ways of expressing something.[72] In his »Des Tours de Babel« Derrida refers to this model of translation, resuming that »the translator wants to touch the untouchable«.[73]

Languages can grow and enrich each other, and as »the sign of this growth is ›present‹ only in the knowledge of that distance« it is no use to amalgamate the differences. We have to feel a remoteness which we cannot overcome »in the intensive mode that renders present what is absent«.[74] And this is why Derrida uses the metaphor of a »theology of translation«:[75] Good translations often cannot be more than good approximations. But this they are, even though differences will always remain.

So we cannot assume – as Habermas does – a *communicative apriori* of all languages[76] and a ›unity of reason in the multiplicity of its voices‹.[77] I would like to end up with a different model, put forward by Wolfgang Welsch, who goes back to Wittgenstein's image of family resemblances. If, as Welsch describes in his lengthy book on »*Reason*«, between different types and areas of rationality there exists a ›transversal rationality‹ as a sort of meta-rational possibility and capacity for building bridges and transitions between cultures (and we have to hope for this possibilty),[78] then this is the place for translating and translators: they are the precursors whom we can follow, they open up possibilities of better understanding, thus showing different ways of seeing the world. And they help us not to remain stuck in the old familiar (and limiting) models of interpretation.

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[72] Benjamin, »Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers«, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV/1, pp. 18–20. See also Lakoff, *Linguistik und natürliche Logik*.
[73] Derrida, »Des Tours de Babel«, p. 191 f.
[74] Derrida, op.cit., p. 203.
[75] see Derrida, »Theologie der Übersetzung«.
[76] See also Loenhoff, op.cit., p. 195.
[77] Habermas, »Die Einheit der Vernunft in der Vielheit ihrer Stimmen«.
[78] Welsch, *Vernunft*, pp. 748–908; viz. Münnix, *Zum Ethos der Pluralität*, pp. 55–60.

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