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Multi-Lingualism and the (In)Stability of Meaning: A Neo-Heideggerian Perspective

The Monolingual Bias of Language Theory

What is at stake here is perhaps the most *stably* held line of argument in contemporary language theory: that of the supposed *instability* of language. This line of argument, which after more than a hundred years of currency[1] has for the most part fallen into the *rigor mortis* of mere rhetoric, goes something like this: the signifier (word) is detached from the signified (concept) and the referent (thing), and so language is said to always already differ and defer meaning (*différance*); in other words, language is, in our current—and I believe needlessly and unjustifiably limited—understanding of it, inevitably, inherently and enduringly unstable with respect to meaning.[2] The question, which I answer here in the positive, now becomes: are there exceptions that defy what Michel Foucault would call this "regime of (monolingual) truth," and if so, what are their consequences?

Theorists and anti-theorists who have advanced and/or refuted these biased arguments, including illustrious figures such as Jacques Derrida and Stanley Fish, have,

for the most part inexcusably overlooked the fact that not all "utterances," in Walter Benn Michaels' and Stephen Knapp's sense of the word,[3] are *monolingual*; as I hope to make clear, the fact that *multilingual* utterances can and do exist (and will surely increase in number and importance with the ongoing march of globalism[4]), with all the theoretical *and* (neo)pragmatic consequences they imply (some of which I will point to here), cannot help but compel us to reconsider the received notions of how language does and does not work. It follows that, though I can only briefly discuss the point here, in reconsidering these notions, the way we understand the role an interpreter plays in any given (multilingual) speech-act, more specifically one that is scripted,[5] will also inevitably change, a change that I believe (for sociological reasons I cannot, unfortunately, go into here[6]) will be for the better of all life on earth and, taking space travel into consideration, beyond the boundaries of our beautiful planet.

My argument—perhaps "preliminary treatment" is a more appropriate categorisation—consists in the putting forth, and establishment as true, of two propositions, to which I will devote two separate sections, as follows:

1. Monolingualism *sustains* the illusion of linguistic stability.

2. Multilingualism *highlights* the inherent instability of language.

There is also a more controversial third proposition, but considering the essential and dense paradox enclosed within it, as will become evident when I put it forward, I will save it for the end of the discussion.

Also important to note is that preliminary treatment of the subject/object is grounded in two of Martin Heidegger's shorter but no less important works: the *Dialogue on Language,*[7] and a section, recently translated from German to English, of the onto-

linguist's last great work, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning*), entitled "Being and Language."[8] The former text consists of Heidegger's record[9] of a conversation with the renowned Japanese Germanist, Tezuka Tomio,[10] and deals with the nature of language from a Western perspective in relation to how the East Asian tradition has come to understand it, with reverent reference to the Japanese aesthetician and both Heidegger and Tezuka's colleague, the then-recently deceased Count Kuki. The latter text, insofar as it concerns our inquiry here, is to be understood as Heidegger's mature conception of the relationship between being and logos. Both texts are themselves multilingual, the former with Japanese, Latin and Ancient Greek, the latter with Ancient Greek alone, though German is predominant in both; it is the common theoretical and pragmatic *content* of these multilingualisms that concerns us here, and the intimate link with their respectively different phenomenological *forms*.

Monolingualism* sustains *the illusion of linguistic stability

What is meant by monolingualism here? Nothing more and nothing less than whenever and wherever an utterance, in being uttered, draws exclusively from one and only one semiotic (or linguistic) system (e.g. English, German, Japanese etc.).

A discourse theorist of the Bakhtinian[11] persuasion would object to this definition, or what Roman Jakobson would call an intra-lingual translation, claiming that language is, in its very essence, always already heteroglossic, meaning that it always already contains elements of the Other's language. However, I render this objection impotent by clarifying what I think Bakhtin's famous term refers to in its specificity; to do so, I will make strategic use of a potent colloquial instance of heteroglossia. In the past decade or

so, the Japanese word "sushi" has entered the English lexicon. To be more precise, it is the sound of the *word* or *sign* "sushi" that has been appropriated by the English language, not its Japanese typographical manifestation; in this appropriation, it has become subject to the linguistic rules of grammar of the English language-system, forfeiting the linguistic rules of grammar belonging to its former semiotic and linguistic master, Japanese. Hence, Bakhtin's heteroglossia refers, when used accurately, not to an inter-semiosis of English and Japanese, which I call multilingualism, but to a re-semiosis of a discrete sign in one semiotic system into a similar and equally discrete sign in another semiotic system. Furthermore, as I see it, typographical manifestations of heteroglossia can and should be considered instances of multilingualism, as opposed to monolingualism, because, though the language rules of *grammar* have changed in an appropriative *spoken* speech-act, the *scripted* speech-act, if kept in the original, is still subject to the materiel-linguistic rules of its originary language-system.

And so, a prime example of monolingualism becomes this very essay, written in English for readers of English. But how, then, does this text "*sustain* the illusion of linguistic stability," as I believe all monolingual texts do? And what does Heidegger mean when he describes these illusions as "dangerous"?

Beginning from the premise, widely accepted and I think true, that all signs are *arbitrarily chosen*, it becomes readily understandable that if a system is homogenous, or put differently, monolingual, this very homogeneity masks such *arbitrary* sign-systems, a monolingual masking, if I am permitted a useful metaphor, that has as its consequence the "illusion of linguistic stability"—firstly, by making its script as normalised as possible insofar as orthographical configurations (or "masks") are related to one another

in that, as in most Western languages, the same letters are arranged in different ways to make different though equally intelligible speech-acts. A second, though just as important, fact stems as a consequence from this first one: considered both diachronically and synchronically, the script of a given semiotic system or language, as a consequence of its monolingual mask, gives the "illusion of linguistic stability." The shortcoming of linguistic structuralism, and all the other structuralisms that grew out of it, was precisely that it mistakes the *mask* of language for its *face*; consciously or not, they subscribe uncritically to the monolingual illusion of linguistic stability. This illusion is what Nietzsche, Heidegger's philosophical and philological predecessor, meant by his infamous understanding of truth as error: that we hold on to the monolingual masks that truth wears (as in, for example, symbolic logic), rather than truth itself, which is always already a plurality, a plurality whose inner forces are in constant struggle with one another.

In the *Dialogue on Language*, where I first encountered an explanation of these phenomena, Heidegger qualifies this illusion of linguistic stability as a "danger." Heidegger uses this term, "danger," in a first sense, to refer to a specific class of monolingual utterances, those that have entered, through heteroglossic appropriation, into an Other language, like "sushi." As a passage from the text goes,

> *Interrogator*: What danger are you thinking of?
> *Japanese*: That we [Japanese-speakers] will let ourselves be set astray by the wealth of concepts which the spirit of the European languages has in store... (4)

The "concepts" of which the Japanese interlocutor speaks are precisely those that originated in the "spirit of European languages," and which masquerade in monolingual

Japanese masks, sustaining a surface of monolingual linguistic stability, called heteroglossia, while a quiet but violent multilingual revolution, more than just a species of what Derrida would call a deconstruction, is taking place just below that surface. In the dialogue, the Japanese interlocutor is referring specifically to Western aesthetics within the Japanese language-system; a reverse case to be found in the same text is a Japanese word, Iki,[12] often returned to in the text, that is scripted in German, and thus can be taken as yet another heteroglossic monolingualism that gives the illusion of linguistic stability.

"Yet," as the German Interrogator goes on, "a far greater danger threatens." This "danger" is to be understood as the second sense Heidegger attributes to the monolingual illusion of linguistic stability. Put as simply as possible, it refers to the attempt—always in vain—to put the face of an Other language on as a mask. As Heidegger writes,

> *Interrogator*: The danger of our dialogues was hidden in language itself, not in *what* we discussed, nor in the *way in which* we tried to do so (original italics, 5).

"Language" here is pointedly singular; it refers to a monolingualism that does not take place in the *content* of the utterance, nor in the *form* of the utterance (i.e. they can be heteroglossic), but rather one that takes place in the "spirit" of a given language, in what is most essential to it, what we have been metaphorically calling its face. As Interrogator goes on, "The language of the dialogue constantly destroys the possibility of saying what the dialogue was about." Read from our point of view, this sentence can be rendered thus: the language's face, by virtue of its monstrously monolingual configuration, destroys the possibility of wearing the face of an Other language as a mask.

It is thus that Heidegger affirms the existence of the monolingual illusion of linguistic stability by qualifying it—I think for good reason—as a danger.

Multilingualism highlights *the inherent instability of language*

As we have already acknowledged, the signs of a given semiotic system are *arbitrarily chosen*, if, by "arbitrarily," we understand a violent struggle of wills to power, configured as wills to (monolingual) representation. The post-structuralists have shed much light on this subject; from Bakhtin's centrifugal and centripetal forces to Foucault's "subversive element," they have enlightened the matter of how, to put it in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, symbolic capital does or does not change hands—monolingual symbolic capital, that is. What gives force to these arguments is their common presumption—I believe accurate—that, in the terms we have used thus far, the reality behind the illusion of linguistic stability, the face without a mask, deceives us and betrays itself by wearing monolingual masks.

It is, I believe, this reality that multilingualism exposes; it is the face unmasked. Heidegger discusses the capacity for multilingualism to highlight the inherent instability of meaning most fully in the section of his last writings, entitled "Be-ing and Logos." The section begins with seven propositions, the third of which concerns us most, and reads as follows:

> Be-ing and the origin of language. Language [as] the resonance that belongs to enowning, in which resonance enowning gifts itself as enstrifing of the strife into the strife itself (earth-world) (the consequence: using up and mere usage of language. (350)

I regret that I cannot go into the meanings of enowning, to which Heidegger devotes more than four hundred of almost impossibly more compactable prose pages. However, I believe that, notwithstanding this shortcoming, by meditating on just two of the concepts in this proposition—*strife* and *resonance*—we can come to a closer understanding of

what I mean when I propose that "multilingualism highlights the inherent instability of language."

Firstly, *strife*, for Heidegger, refers to the same thing we encountered as the common ground for most post-structuralists; it is the reality behind the monolingual illusion of linguistic stability, the face unmasked. Thus, when Heidegger describes *resonance*—a term I will turn to shortly—as (foregoing enowning) an "enstrifing of the strife into the strife itself," he is discussing the ceaseless struggle of wills to power that have as their consequences the signs we cannot help but use; he is discussing the face of a language and not one of its masks.

In order to understand what Heidegger means by the word *resonance*, I will make reference to one word and one word only that Heidegger uses in this section, an Ancient Greek word given in Greek type: λόγος (logos). The term is too rich for me to devote a worthy amount of space here, and so I will treat one aspect—an important one—of Heidegger's use of it: the fact that it is scripted in Ancient Greek. To be brief, as I see it, what this does is create a kind of multilingual nexus, in which two linguistic galactic systems brush up against one another on the very page—or very screen—we are reading from, the traces of which we train our eyes to perceive, and perceive well. When I propose, albeit monolingually, that "multilingualism highlights the inherent instability of language," it is precisely this capacity of scripts, when they intersect with other scripts, to reify—in a positively valuated sense of the term—the strife we encountered above; metaphorically, though in keeping with the Classical tradition, two strings on the harp of language have been struck at the same time, and they form together a kind of dissonant harmony. The sound of this dissonant harmony, translated into sight, is what Heidegger

refers to with the term *resonance*; by *gift* he wants us to understand a giving up of one's self to an Other, in a rapturous moment of typographical multilingualism that Heidegger himself enacts every time he scripts the word—or Word—λόγος.

Multilingualism* overcomes *the inherent instability of language

As I have indicated above, I have waited to put this proposition forth to the end of our discussion, because of the dense and essential paradox within it. We have come to understand how multilingualism highlights the inherent instability, by idiosyncratically and comparatively foregrounding the arbitrariness of signs belonging to different semiotic systems; if we add to this a simultaneous *overcoming* of linguistic instability, the paradox within this third proposition begins to unfold. Because of the density of this paradox, I can but treat it in a rather tentative way here, noting that my future thought—and I hope that of other thinkers as well—will turn to it again.

How does multilingualism *overcome* the inherent instability of language? First, it highlights, by making multilingualism materially manifest, and at the same time overcomes the fact it itself set about to reify, the fact of the instability of language; but reify should here be understood as a climax rather than a settling of linguistic instability. To paraphrase Pierre Klossowski: multilingualism develops an unambiguous inquiry into the forces of stability and instability; it ceaselessly oscillates between fixation (in (un)clear and (in)constant signs) and the propensity to semiotic movement, to the dispersions of itself—to the point where the tension provokes a rupture between the illusionary monolingual *stability of language* and *that which* monolingual masks are unable to signify other than in its illusory *fixity*.[13]

This rupture, as I see it, was brought forth in our examination of Heidegger's use of λόγος in "Be-ing and Language," but not in his use of Iki in the *Dialogue on Language*, nor in the use of the *discrete* word-sign "sushi;" this rupture, by the very fact that it is interpretable, is like the explosion of a volcano, or the precipice of a waterfall, is also a vortex that makes the most of linguistic instability, by highlighting it; it is this making most of, i.e. bringing linguistic instability to the foreground *while remaining interpretable,* that I call an *overcoming* of linguistic instability.

As I see them, multilingual texts offer researchers a unique environment to contest the so-called "crisis of referentiality" advanced by poststructuralists and deconstructionists, according to whom the gaps between signifiers, signified and referents render the truthfulness and reliability of language at best unstable and at worst undecidable. As the passages we have examined suggest, when two different signifiers belonging to two different semiotic systems are used to signify in one and the same proposition or utterance, I would argue that, to a certain extent, the relationship of language to reality—its truthfulness or reliability—is made, if not stable and decidable, then at least more so—a "wellspring of reality," to use Heidegger's words. While in agreement with so-called "discourse theorists," such as Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin, who explicitly trace the language of literature to its source in the spoken language of everyday life, and insist that literary language is uttered by embodied subjects situated historically in social spheres regulated by institutions, I would further argue that the multilingual meanings exhibited in texts such as Heidegger's "Be-ing and Logos" suggest that a multilingual utterance, unlike its monolingual counterpart, can,

thanks to its interlingual interplay, remain meaningful even if disembodied, de-historicised and taken out of its social context.

As Klossowski would have us say, it is as if inertia itself were inverted into the *obstinacy* of words, as if the illusory stability of monolingual utterances were replaced, qua representational overcoming, by a multilingual utterance that in highlighting linguistic instability would be equivalent to an *obstinate gesture*, recuperating the (in)communicable, dispersed under multilingualism's appearance of incoherence.[14] In this manner, we have come to recapitulate for ourselves, and with Heidegger's help, the three propositions that are leading us to a *theory of multilingualism*:

1. Monolingualism *sustains* the illusion of linguistic stability.

2. Multilingualism *highlights* the inherent instability of language.

3. Multilingualism *overcomes* the inherent instability of language.

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[1] If we take (albeit somewhat arbitrarily) Saussure's *Course on General Linguistics*, given at the start of the twentieth century (1907-1911), as a point of origin.

[2] It is extremely important to note that language scientists, as opposed to language theorists, have developed an invaluable body of mostly empirical work on multilingualism over the past sixty years or so, to which I am inexpressibly indebted. For an excellent critical review of the work that has been done in this area, as well as what I find the most convincing argument for a psycho-linguistic model of multlingualism, see Philip Herdina and Ulrike Jessner's *A Dynamic Model of Multilingualism: Perspectives of Change in Psycholinguistics* (Clevedon, UK, Buffalo, NY and Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 2002), as well as all the books in the Multilingual Matters Series, edited by John Edwards, which is the vanguard series in this area.

[3] See their (in)famous essay, "Against Theory," first published in the prestigious journal *Critical Inquiry*, and now available in many anthologies of literary theory and criticism.

[4] I borrow the image of the "march" from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America,* which I am currently translating for the Oxford World Classics Series (edited by John Torpey), and in which de Tocqueville describes the coming of democracy as a kind of unstoppable march.

[5] In a forthcoming work on the politico-historical aesthetics/rhetorics/poetics of typography, entitled *Troubling Typography: Essays in the Cultural Rhetorics of Scripts,* I give a somewhat technical definition of script, as opposed to writing *tout court*, as "a self-conscious and pragmatic (in the general, philosophical

and linguistic sense of the word) use of the writing medium broadly understood." As I see them, all scripted multilingual utterances are by definition self-conscious, insofar as, having more than one semiotic system at her/his disposal, a writer must *decide* which s/he will use; similarly, it is readily understandable that if s/he chooses one language in one instance, and another language in a related instance, s/he has some (pragmatic) effect in mind. Spoken multilingualism has been widely discussed by socio-linguists under the rubric of "di-glossia;" I will treat multilingualism only insofar as it relates to scripts here.

[6] At an upcoming conference on communities, I will be presenting a paper entitled "Letting go of Linguistic Lines: Multilingualism, Mutual Knowledge Theory and Collectivity," in which I argue that in reconsidering the epidemically held truth, at least amongst contemporary discourse theorists, that language plays a vital role in community formation, I examine para-linguistic phenomena (place, time, materiality, etc.) and put forth a challenging alternative to "community," namely, "collectivity," which has multilingualism as a condition of its existence, development and sustenance.

[7] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (NY and London: Harper Collins, 1982). According to Heinrich Wiegand Petzet, in his *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger, 1929-1976*, translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), Heidegger himself considered this to be one of his most important texts (166/175).

[8] Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning),* trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[9] Heidegger's record was complimented with that of Tezuka on the publication of the Japanese translation of the text; for Tezuka's complete text, see Chapter 7 of Reinhard May's *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East Asian influences on his Work*, translated by Graham Parkes (London: Routledge 1989). My understanding of the dialogue is, in ways I can unfortunately not go into here, indebted to this text. I would like to thank my friend and colleague Ramy Salama for referring me to this book, as well as for his unceasingly insightful thoughts, help and support in preparing this essay. I would also like to thank Claudia Barrington-Davison for her continued support; this piece is a testament to our vision.

[10] In Japanese, family names are given first, and personal names second.

[11] See M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

[12] Iki refers to a complicated concept in Japanese aesthetics; the English words *chic, elegant, delicate, smart, pretty, refined* and *tasteful*, taken as a whole, only give a vague approximation of the concept. Count Kuki wrote a treatise on the subject, using Heidegger's hermeneutics. See also May, 19 and 93-6.

[13] See his *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle,* translated by Daniel W. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 219.

[14] Ibid.