

# A Global Language or a World of Languages

Hans Joachim Meyer

Sächsischer Staatsminister für Wissenschaft und Kunst a. D.  
Calvinstraße 5A  
10557 Berlin

As a kind of prelude to your conference I am going to speak about the alternative „A Global Language or a World of Languages“. This theme opens up a vast field of questions and problems which have been considered and debated for ages. In fact, one could call this one of the basic themes of human thinking. You need not fear that I will make the hopeless attempt to cover this field of human endeavour. Instead, I can only offer a few remarks and arguments.

You may remember that the Old Testament describes man's attitude to language in two highly distinct ways. In the paradise, which was a place of peace and concord, there was only one language. When paradise had been lost, mankind tried to establish their own rule over the world by building a tower to reach heaven. This was the famous or infamous Tower of Babel. But this attempt failed, because God confounded their language, so that the offenders couldn't understand each other any longer. So in the Old Testament, language is presented both as a symbol of harmony and as a symbol of conflict. In the New Testament, the opposition between the one language that is common to all men and the diversity of languages which separate men is overcome at Pentecost, the birthday of the church, when the Holy Spirit appearing as flames of fire enables men to understand each other, although they are speaking different languages.

In the King James Bible, the Authorized Version in the Church of England, this event is related in the English of 1611 as follows:

“And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there was a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.”

(Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2, Verses 1 – 9)

The idea of one language which would unite the whole of mankind was and still is a vision and a grand hope. And at the same time it is a problem and a challenge which has troubled many thinkers and philosophers for centuries. Jürgen Trabant, an expert for the Romance languages and one of the outstanding scholars of linguistics in present-day Germany has written a fascinating book which describes the history of this idea and analyses its fallacies. The title of this book is „Mithridates im Paradies“. (1) Such a title for an historical outline of the thinking on language may surprise, but for the problems discussed it is a remarkable and a really fitting metaphor. You may ask: Who – for Heaven's sake - was Mithridates? Well, Mithridates lived from 130 till 63 BC and was King of Pontus – a kingdom which was located near the Black Sea. He was the last opponent of the Roman Empire in this region, in fact, quite a formidable one who even for some time conquered Roman provinces, but in the end he was defeated and took poison to avoid Roman captivity. What he is remembered and even admired for, is his knowledge of languages. It is said that he was able to speak twenty-two languages. Some maintain that he even knew fifty languages.

Now, the important thing for our topic is that in this respect Mithridates was the exact opposite of his Roman adversaries who didn't learn any foreign language at all but expected the others, particularly

those whom they had subjugated, to learn Latin. In the Roman Empire Latin was the language of political power, of the army, of the law. It was almost the same as today with the Americans and the British, most of whom will neither understand nor accept that there are people who look like human beings, but don't know English. There is, however, one important difference: Also under Roman domination the language of higher education and learning was Greek, because even the Romans regarded Greek thinking as superior. You will know that the Apostle Paulus, the first theologian of Christianity, wrote his famous letters in Greek and so he could be understood by all the newly founded Christian communities.

Up to the eighteenth century educated people in Europe regarded Mithridates and his astonishing linguistic competence as the counterexample to the linguistic arrogance and ignorance of those who are mighty enough to use their language as a symbol of superiority, as an advantage in competition and quite often as a tool of rule and suppression. Jürgen Trabant, when naming Mithridates in the title of his book, reminds us of this almost forgotten tradition and combines this with the still well-known metaphor of paradise as the place of general understanding. What Trabant wants to say is this: Understanding is achieved or, at least, becomes a realistic option, if people know and are ready to use the languages of their fellow-beings. Which means: Knowing and using a language other than their own one. Thus the title of his book pleads for the diversity of languages and their values. What Trabant claims, is this: We must preserve the languages of the world, because they are a treasure house and a source of intellectual insight. And if people are ready to learn foreign languages, the lingual multitude in our world will not be a barrier against the unity of mankind.

Of course, Trabant's book is a contribution to the ongoing debate whether we should strive for a global language or preserve the languages of the world. But what, in fact, is a global language? In reality, a global language can only be one of the existing national languages, because, as we know, all the attempts to construct an artificial language as a global instrument of communication failed. Hence, to opt for a global language as an alternative to our present world of languages means that we accept one of the existing languages as the global language and neglect all the others, including our own language.

This is a debate in a world of dramatic change. Undoubtedly, a dominant trend in this process of change is an ever increasing globalization. When we speak of globalization, two things should be clear. First of all, this is an objective process in human history, which nobody can and will stop. Moreover, it is a change which is fulfilling old visions and long cherished hopes of humanity. The chances for a global exchange are a fantastic achievement for research. The electronic revolution has turned our globe into a gigantic net of laboratories and discussion groups making research a worldwide effort which everybody must join who wants to contribute to the progress of insights and inventions. Of course global scientific communication needs either a common language or people who are able and ready to learn foreign languages. Again we are confronted with an alternative, namely, whether we should learn only one foreign language or a few foreign languages.

But what could motivate people to learn more than one foreign language? They are definitely not motivated by globalization. In fact, a globalized world has the opposite effect, because it is dominated by the strongest political and economic power, particularly as far as language and culture are concerned. It is a popular error to assume that the global dominance of a language follows from its inherent lexical and grammatical qualities. As history has shown again and again it is political and economic power which leads to cultural reputation. When France was the strongest power in Europa, French became the language of European aristocracy. In real life, language and culture are two sides of the same medal, because language and thought are interdependent. Hence, the way we think has been culturally shaped since our birth. And the same is true for the way we use our language in communication and, particularly, in our rhetoric, both in everyday life and in academic discourse. In fact, we live in a highly complex world. The question is, whether its cultural and linguistic complexity can really be reduced to a simple alternative.

The way German universities and German research organisations react to this challenge gives the impression that they believe in such a simple solution. I'm sorry to say that, at least in my view, their thinking is naive and superficial. When asked, their representatives will probably maintain that they pursue a strategy of internationalization. Now, let me first say that this sounds very reasonable and highly convincing. Indeed, research and higher learning are undoubtedly international phenomena. Therefore it is a fantastic advantage that today progress in cognition is typically achieved in international networks which are immediately cooperating. Research is an international project. The same is true for university studies which today should include at least one period of academic education at a foreign university. As a logical consequence, universities regard it as a proof of their quality to attract researchers and students from all over the world.

In so far, the claim of the universities that they practise a strategy of internationalisation seems to be correct. But what does the concept of internationalization really mean? Also in former times the internationality of research was an ideal of the scientific community. Their consequence, however, was to speak or at least to understand more than one foreign language. Up to the sixties of the last century a reading comprehension of German was a prerequisite for obtaining a Ph. D. at American universities. In contrast, for the present policy of German universities the most important element of internationalisation is the use of English. Hence, it is a strategy which plays according to the rules of the English-speaking world. True internationality, however, is based on partnership. Otherwise it would be linguistic and cultural imperialism as Robert Phillipson, a British expert for international communication, has repeatedly pointed out. (2) As we all know, the developing global society has only one dominating centre, both in language and in culture. And these are English and the culture of the United States. And their position and influence are increasing at the cost of other languages and cultures. So, in reality, German university policy aims at globalization, not at internationalization.

Also the mechanism which supports this development is obvious. The driving force of the global society is world-wide competition for individual success. The wish to be read and quoted as widely as possible and in this way to become "visible" induces many scientists to publish in English. As we all know, the effect of national benefits is weakening and the importance of prestige in national societies decreasing, whereas success in the global game seems to become more and more attractive. This is particularly true for the German society, which prefers to use English as a signal of modernity and creativity. The irony of history consists in the contrast between individual motivation, on the one hand, and the effect on individual freedom, on the other. In fact, globalization results in diminishing chances for individuals to take their own choice with regard to language and style, because of the immense power in the hands of a small group of academic gatekeepers. Before non-English authors start writing, they have to accept the global rules laid down by a US-dominated science and by a US-dominated publication business.

Globalization, however, is not the only prevalent trend in our world. At the same time, we observe an increasing internationalisation. In contrast to globalization, it is characteristic for true internationality to be multicultural and multilingual, as we can observe in our own society and in many societies of the world. This internationalism is the result of two highly contrastive developments. On the one hand, there is an increasing number of people who for personal or professional reasons change their place of life and move into another country – either for some time or for their whole life. On the other hand, there is an increasing number of dramatic conflicts in many regions of the world, with horrible consequences for people involved in them. Of course many victims of these conflicts make every sacrifice to migrate because they don't see any other chance for their lives and their future.

In both cases the migrants come to us as products of their language and their culture. Quite often, Germany is the country of their hope. Thus we are changing into a multicultural and multilingual society. To us this is both a chance and a challenge. A chance, because for demographic reasons we need people who are eager to live a new life and to work for it quite hard. A challenge, because our culture is confronted with highly different ways of life and modes of thinking. Historical experience has taught us that a certain degree of cultural identity is necessary to master the tasks and difficulties of a common life peacefully. This is particularly true for free and democratic societies. Furthermore,

Germans know that their country would never have been reunited without our common cultural heritage. At the same time, we also know from our history how much we owe in our cultural tradition to the exchange with other peoples and to the valuable contribution which migrants made to German culture. The worst thing for a free and open society to do in a time of migration would be to give room to hostile repulsion and nationalistic prejudice. What we need is a dynamic concept of national identity which combines the values of tradition and the chances of development.

In any case, globalization and internationalization are two different phenomena which support and contradict each other. Simplifying the processes which are characteristic for this complex situation one could say: Globalization aims to enforce cultural homogeneity, whereas internationalization tends to produce cultural heterogeneity. I'm afraid that German university policy is not really aware of this difference. In fact, reality may show a mixture of the two conflicting trends. Thus, the Italian scholar Maurizio Gotti recently observed that in spite of the homogenizing effects of globalization, international academic discourse in English is not uniform at all, but still shows great variation due to national tradition and culture. (3)

So far, I've discussed the problem in terms of general relevance. There is, however, an aspect that is particularly characteristic for scientific thinking, which is also discussed in Trabant's book. And this is the old ideal to create a language whose most prominent quality is to allow statements of full clarity and high precision. History is full of the lamentations of scholars and philosophers about the lack of clarity in natural languages. Therefore it has been attempted again and again to purify the natural languages or to construct artificial languages. Artificial languages may be of some use, but most linguists are convinced that it is a fundamental error and a total misunderstanding of the nature of languages to accuse them of being inaccurate and as not precise enough. Only a language which is not precise but ambiguous in the sense that words and utterances have more than one meaning – only such a language can be flexible. And only a flexible language whose words and expressions do not refer to one and only one thing or entity but provide us with a wide and manifold semantic potential can express and suggest new lines of thinking. There could be neither literary imagery nor any intellectual development without a flexible language.

In addition, mankind has already developed an instrument for dealing with abstract concepts, relations and structures. And this is mathematics. Mathematics provides us with a special kind of global language which satisfies the criterion of highest precision. In fact, as you know much better than I do, mathematics provides systems of signs, relations and structures which do not only enable us to formulate discovered laws and necessities inherent in matter in an unequivocal way, but also may lead us to new insights and discoveries when investigating natural processes. In a bold metaphor, mathematics could be called the language of material reality. Therefore it is the necessary aim of research in the natural sciences to define their results in terms of mathematics. As you know, in the natural sciences the mathematically correct formulation both of the research procedure and of the results obtained is the main criterion of scientific recognition. Consequently, in the natural sciences the role of the natural languages is definitely less important than in other fields of academic research.

This, however, is not the only factor which weakens the position of the natural languages other than English in globalized research. In addition, English has become the lingua franca of scientific communication. Quite often, this is taken as a striking argument to justify that scientists do no longer use their own languages in scientific discourse, although, as e.g. German, they have a long and proud academic tradition. It is popular to maintain that today English plays the same role as Latin did for medieval thinking and writing. For a number of reasons, this is totally wrong. First of all, the Lingua franca of the middle ages was not Latin, but an idiom combining Arabic and Italian elements which was used by sailors and merchants in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea for the purposes of information and organisation. In other words, the communicative functions of this lingua franca were restricted as was its lexical and grammatical register. In fact, modern linguistics uses this term to characterize language varieties which are used for information processes in border crossing markets, as e.g. Swahili in East Africa.

The question is, in which sense it is linguistically justified to call the English in international scientific communication a lingua franca? Quite definitely it is able to convey a highly sophisticated content, because otherwise it could not function as a language for scientists. At the same time, this variety of English is characterized by a strong tendency of linguistic standardization. That is, it uses only a restricted code of lexical elements and grammatical structures, and the text production follows definite patterns of rhetorical strategies. Typically a language used as a lingua franca serves as a means of information. Linguistic analyses have shown that there is a clear division between the processes of investigation and discovery and the formulation of the results obtained for the purpose of publication. The English which is used in research exploits the vast semantic potential which is characteristic for a highly developed living language. It is a treasure which, typically, is at the disposal of educated people whose mother tongue is English. In fact, Latin was given up as a language of research because it was no longer in close contact with the living world and the constantly developing creative culture. Therefore, scholars and scientists turned to the emerging national languages in order to express their new concepts. Of course it is true that also speakers of foreign languages, with an immense effort, are able to immerse into the world of English to such a depth that they also become masters of this language. Quite often, however, there is a marked difference between those scientists, whose mother-tongue is English, and those whose mother tongue is not English. In fact, only the latter ones use English as a lingua franca. But, as every scientist knows, it is only the native speakers who determine the rules of the global game, particularly in journals and in the citation business. (4) They are writing and they are rewriting the history of science in their interest. Even in the humanities, it becomes quite usual for British and American authors to write articles and textbooks exclusively on the basis of literature in English because they are not able to make use of the literature written in a foreign language.

A global world is a hierarchy of languages and cultures. What we urgently need is a rational debate on language and research as part of our culture – both of our changing national cultures and of the presently emerging global culture. In my view, there are two vistas of development. I am firmly convinced that both the aims and results of research and the character of academic education must remain an integral part of national life. It would have disastrous consequences, if there could be no longer a dialogue between science and society about the problems of our common life and about ways of meeting the challenges of the future. This is particularly true for democratic societies. Yet, in a foreseeable time, there will be no global democracy. Democracy lives in nations or in union of nations which share common values. For these societies, the necessities and possibilities of research and of academic education should be among the central topics of their ongoing public debate. Also in our time, science and society need each other – not only in a political, but also in a cultural sense. There can be no modern culture without scientific thinking. And scientific thinking thrives on the impulses of a highly developed culture and the semantic treasure of a rich and intricate language.

At the same time, however, we have to accept as a reality that research is propelled by global exchange and global challenge. The charm of globalization seems to be irresistible. It promises individual success. It also threatens to divide the world into a dominating centre and its dependant territories. It is the centre that imposes the rules of the game on everybody. Hence there is no equality of chances in a globalized world.

Nevertheless, the truth is: We have no choice in this matter. On the one hand, there is English as a global lingua franca which undoubtedly offers a big chance for communication and cooperation, particularly in the natural sciences. As far as I can see, it is only the relation between theory and practice which also in this field still requires the use of the national languages. On the other hand, there is the richness offered by a world of cultures and of languages. It remains in the interest of mankind to study and understand societies and their cultures in terms of identity and difference. Achieving this kind of progress is the task of the humanities and the social sciences. They will not be able to do that without a good knowledge of the specific society under investigation, nor without a reliable command of the language of this society and its concepts and metaphors. If in the field of the humanities and the social sciences academic disciplines submit to the rules of globalization and take the concepts of the central power in the globalizing world as their intellectual guidelines, they will run

the risk of becoming irrelevant for their own societies. Last but not least, scientific progress needs a constant interdisciplinary exchange of ideas and arguments between the various academic fields. Would that be possible in one language only? (5)

In my view there is enough evidence to suggest that the question “A global language or a world of languages” does not offer a real alternative. There is no simple answer to a complex question. We have to cope with both – the global language and the diversity of the languages. In this perspective the following difference seems to offer some consolation to all those, who will have to learn English, if they wish to be successful in the present age of globalization: All those whose mother tongue is not English are immediately confronted with the real world which is multicultural and multilingual, whereas the only English speakers must resist the temptation to believe that the world speaks only one language and lives only one culture. Learning to recognize and to accept that, as Shakespeare put it, “there are more things in heaven and on earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy”, is the first step to become an adult person and a scientist.

- (1) Jürgen Trabant, *Mithridates im Paradies. Kleine Geschichte des Sprachdenkens*. C. H. Beck München 2003
- (2) Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford University Press 1992. Ders., *English-Only Europe? Routledge London 2003*
- (3) Maurizio Gotti, *Investigating Academic Identity Traits*. In: *The European English Messenger*, vol. 24.1 Summer 2015, pp. 15 – 21
- (4) Hans Joachim Meyer, *Lingua franca – Möglichkeiten und Grenzen*. In: Walter Schmitz / Ingeborg Fiala-Fürst (Eds.), *Wissen durch Sprache? Historische und systematische Positionen*. Dresden 2013, pp. 17 – 30. Konrad Ehlich, *Eine Lingua franca für die Wissenschaft?* In: Heinrich Oberreuter / Wilhelm Krull / Hans Joachim Meyer / Konrad Ehlich (Eds), *Deutsch in der Wissenschaft. Ein politischer und wissenschaftlicher Diskurs*. Olzog München 2012, pp. 81 - 100
- (5) Hans Joachim Meyer, *Vom Sinn wissenschaftlicher Mehrsprachigkeit*. In: *Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina Jahrbuch 2011, Halle (Saale) 2012*, pp. 599 – 616