

Zum Geleit

Ergon & Energéia: an inside view of 45 years of linguistic research

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Hotel Gay-Lussac, 28 *Rue Gay-Lussac*, a few streets south of the Panthéon. The small dowdy breakfast room of the hotel is half full. Standard breakfast: large café au lait, greasy croissant, gaullaises caporal sans filtre. The bustling proprietor interrupts to say that there is somebody – a *Monsieur Cellard* - on the phone in the hall for her. With something between diffidence and apprehension she goes out to take the call. She returns, excited, pleased, incredulous: Cellard, Jacques Cellard of *Le Monde* ("journaliste, linguiste, et romancier français" according to fr. wikipedia.org today) invites her to come to his place of work in the *Rue des Italiens*. Excited, pleased, shocked. M. Cellard proposes lunch close to *Le Monde* after their meeting.

Two days later, *Rue du Faubourg Poissonnière*, building of *L'Humanité*, the newspaper of the French Communist Party, the PCF. Two days of hesitation before screwing up courage to take the step. Strict controls at the entrance as expected, mistrustful looks, hard to comprehend, a wait in the rather clinical foyer (a note written the same day remarks: 'struck by the layout'). A thin, sallow man enters. Mistrust in his gaze, too. His name is Hanno, himself a journalist for the paper. He has been asked to come down to see if he can help in answering her questions, though he admits to not knowing exactly what she wants to know.

Tübingen, October 1978, Winter Semester.

Main lecture hall of the *Neuphilologikum*, which some insist on calling the Bert-Brecht-Building (the same people insist on calling the University 'Ernst Bloch Universität', but in vain). Professor Eugenio Coseriu, before beginning his recurrent main lecture on the verb system of the romance languages, digresses for a moment. He announces to the students that one of their number, Fräulein Burr, has been mentioned in an article in the most prestigious French newspaper, *Le Monde*, and namely in connection with

her study of language use in French newspapers. *Le Monde's* house expert for the French language, M. Jacques Cellard, has dedicated his column "*Chronique du langage*" to Fräulein Burr's investigations into the use of the past historic in newspaper language. Coseriu praises her initiative and recommends her to the others as an example they should follow. He clears his throat, turns to the board, says äh a number of times before beginning, very likely, with Saussure's notion of parole, the significance of ergon and energéia, or the relationship between Humboldt and Aristotle and the Greek origins of romance verb systems. She is astonished, embarrassed, delighted, shocked, by turns by Coseriu's words, his praise, his attention. The mix of emotions is still written in her face hours later. The echoes of this will go deep. Maturing over time, the deeply personal elements of this intellectual skein will surface in many different forms over the years to come.

Tübingen, Romance languages in Tübingen, a European skein of things.

Newspaper language, the verb system of the Romance languages, quantitative research, language corpora. All of these 'interests' were born in the Coseriu lectures, unbeknown to the Meister himself, of course, in combination, however, with an intensely-lived commitment to popular culture and social progress. Further, a vigorous immersion in the student life Tübingen offered, and an almost self-cancelling dissolution in the life of countries central to her studies provided Elly with biographical resources for a learning process of work and action taut with productively contradictory elements: Tübingen, for example, meant the Student Parliament and the Waldhäuser Student Residence Council, gloriously furious meetings, standing room only for Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch, Hans Küng and Walter Jens. But it also meant seminars in the Alte Bursa under creaking beams, and jobbing in local restaurants serving homesick French conscripts from the Tübingen garrison. Living, too, among probably the last-surviving Tübingen Gôgen, the Tübingen Swabian locals, vintners and railway-people all, was grounding in all the swirl of university studies.

Italy as a student involved regular descents on Rome to earn money as a tourist guide for an arch-Catholic travel agency, a forced confrontation with *l'Allemagne profonde* of the early 70s, certainly no joke, but also mad

trips across the Apennines in her chrome yellow VW Beetle *Halifax*, packed to bursting with revelling foreigners all intent on the road, Rome, and romance.

Her relationships to Spain were played out in the last years of General Franco, his lingering death-grip reflected in the daily papers' everlasting refrain confirming the health of the King, the glorious sunshine and the continual arrival of foreign tourists. Spain for her was also insight into the cold of winter in unheated southern buildings, the confidential, thrilling acquaintance with Catalan nationalism and acquiring censored LPs by *Raimón*, but entering, too, into the superlatively conformist ambience of the student *Tunas* of Valencia.

A year in France saw endless solitary drives through wintry Picard lanes, and Amiens, a gray-built industrial city, the revolutionary hum of the *Maison de la Culture*, a personal acquaintance with Sevillan poetry, as well as William Burroughs, André Breton, and automatic writing.

Each of these encounters found their different ways into a special fascination with Coseriu's systematic body of work. The discovery, too, as a student, of the force driving a theoretical School such as Coseriu's and seeing and experiencing the physical presence of such a School and its burgeoning emerging personalities, had a strong emotional and intellectual effect on her. University was much more than simply studying for the first *Zulassungsarbeit*. Studying was quite simply so much more than a path to a final examination. And it should not be forgotten that every student of Romance Studies, but for that matter, of German, History, English and all the rest, was there to become a grammar-school teacher. No-one in the 70s 'did' a *Magister Artium*, and no-one had yet heard, o frabjous day, of a 'Masters' ...

She too, at the outset in '71, had assumed without question that the simple aim of university was, naturally, school teaching.

Autumn of 1975 and beyond

She has decisively already abandoned the broad ways of academe and with them the expectation of a life in school (even as far as to weigh up the chances of emigration to Canada to escape the conservatism beckoning her) and is moving with increasing confidence into uncertain straits by the winter of a year in the middle of the 70s.

In a frozen room heated desperately and suffocatingly by an asthmatic gas fire, in a frozen, empty house in Leeds, she worked intensively, doggedly even, on the use of verb tenses in the *Morning Star*. Her commitment to the study she was working on (the seminar paper for a Hauptseminar held by the jovial American Professor David Reibel) perplexed in all its seriousness the other inhabitants of the frozen house. Used themselves to spend their time drinking endless mugs of tea and smoking substantial numbers of cigarettes, they were genuinely impressed by her commitment and knowledge, and struggled to understand the significance of what she was doing. The seminar paper earned her an excellent grade, though the precise reaction of Prof. Reibel is unknown.

The newspaper investigation, however, by now becomes the focus of her interest. The methodology is provided by a Romance language perspective, capable and desirous of comprehending language use across related languages and only so. An approach rooted in the realization of language, centred on the historic language, rejecting 'invented' language and theoretical systems divorced from the 'social'. The field: French, Spanish, Italian newspapers. *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *ABC*, *Informaciones*; later *il Corriere della Sera*, *Repubblica*, *il Mattino* and *Paese Sera*. The popular press (in Naples *Paese Sera* becomes a special focus), the work of Paolo Murialdi, the impact of sociolinguistics, popular linguistics, dialect and gender. The enormous and lasting presence of Tullio de Mauro. A continuing and growing interest in the historic language, and in particular in the antagonistic relationship between national languages and dialect. For Italian this means a vigorous deconstruction of Manzoni and Ascoli, of Bembo and Dante. Historical grammars, language and patriarchy. Historical grammars, language and society.

The cold and the quantities of fish and chips and tea back in Leeds might conceivably have dampened the spirit of research, had not Arnold Kettle, Margot Heinemann, but above all, Raymond Williams provided an incomparable legitimating force that married well with the turn to popular forms of language such as the popular press and their embeddedness in social transformation, social justice and learning processes.

Doing being a student in the late '70s when she completes her studies in Romance Languages and Literature and English, adding on a third main course of study in German, is accompanied by the imaginary and the soundtrack of Rainer Werner Fassbinder and his unembellished homilies on West German materialism; by translating from the Spanish for the

Chilean musicians of *Quilapayún* to a jam-packed Mensa and Ernst Bloch's funeral in August 1977.

A crucial transitional influence, too, came from working for the Italian trade unions' worker education programme, assisting Italian *gastarbeiter* from Orgosolo, or the Provinces of Catania or Lecce or from wherever the Italian state in those years failed to provide a dignified future, to obtain their middle school certificate.

The soundtrack in the head was provided by, among others, the feminism of Bea Campbell and *Red Letters*, of Sheila Rowbotham and *Hidden From History*, of Elena Gianini Belotti and *Dalle Parte Delle Bambine*, but equally by the entire *Rougon-Macquart* and a fiercely feminist reconsideration of the *Précieuses*.

Paris and after: the way and the goal

She discussed with Jacques Cellard her findings, namely that the past historic, routinely relegated to the dusty realms of literary narrative, was in fact to be found abundantly and in surprising good health across the whole gamut of newspaper rubrics. He was evidently intrigued and went on to write about this in his column. He even invited her to visit him in his country retreat where he had his library, an invitation she never took up.

M. Hanno listened not entirely freely to similar arguments regarding the past historic. It could not be, he responded. *L'Humanité*, as the organ of the most advanced section of the workers' movement, could not possibly clutter its texts with literary dross. Yet a single account of a football match the day before yielded on the spot half a dozen examples of the suspicious form of speech ...

A visit to the Académie Française on the Seine had yielded nothing. The visit to *Le Monde* had yielded on the other hand an invitation and an exceptional mention in Coseriu's lecture (and his particular, if inconstant, attention thereafter). But more was yet to come.

First, surprisingly, a package arrives in the summer of 1978 from M. Hanno. Struck, no doubt, by the recording of his rather mistrustful remarks on a cheap Quelle¹-bought battery cassette-recorder wielded by her at their

¹ Quelle – one of the leading mail-order businesses in Germany.

meeting, he had taken the initiative of starting a small interview survey of his own among the editorial staff of the embattled prickly fortress of French communism *L'Humanité* on the question of the use of the past historic in their journalistic work. The fruits of this touching example of selfless commitment was a rough piece of action research which meant more for its spirit of generosity than for the results it intended to present. It was proof that that supposedly moribund discipline, the detailed study of active language use, could involve, fire and, later one would say, *empower* people to ask questions... When a similar cassette arrives, too, from Cellard, the result of his own investigations in the hallowed rooms of the *Rue des Italiens*, the strait gate seems to be opening out onto an avenue. Certainly, way and goal seem to be becoming one: on August 22nd 1978, in fact, she proposes the investigation into the realization in newspaper language of the Coserian verbal system to Professor Coseriu himself, who agrees to accept this for a thesis, dictating to her his fulsome acceptance in the necessary letter to the exam office. Her plan, to study newspaper language, and to apply to this the statistical method set out in the East German edition of Marcel Cohen's work, is bold. It is original, to be sure. It is, quite simply, unparalleled.

Language variety and 40 years of research practice

There is room for speculation: while not envisaged as such, the effect of her research on those now distant Parisian practitioners was comparable to opting for a form of participatory action research, above all because autonomous practice was triggered that had a clearly transformative character, and this marks a moment in which her research practice crystallized in her hands for the first time. Then, this first foray into quantitative research is itself transformed by the 5 years spent immersed in the vivid surrealities of Naples and under the influence of increasingly accessible computer technology from the mid-80s (by which time she is in Duisburg) into the doctoral study on verb and variety in Italian newspapers which includes a 1000-page annexe, which before the advent of the internet represents the equivalent of the online corpora this and subsequent studies, from the middle of the 90s onwards, give birth to. The number-crunching previously painstakingly performed by hand on another *Quelle*-purchased device, a 30-D-Mark pocket calculator, evolves into serious computer-aided language data analysis and welds her fundamental relationship to the emerging field of language corpora and its software (OCR, Word Cruncher,

MonoConc). The transition, from 1988 on, to computer-driven data analysis welds, too, the fundamentally creative relationship to the people inhabiting this new field of studies internationally. Finding access to, and recognition in, such evolving scientific communities for a rising academic who stands wholly alone inside and outside the established academic structures, above all in Germany, can scarcely be imagined at the time of writing, where the sheer hype around the 'digital' has become the most common, if not debased, currency of all.

Alone in the entire (by then unified) German academic landscape she sought and found dialogue and collaboration in the international community of early digital humanists, who have since grown together to create associations on every continent, of which she is today, of course, one of the most important individual figures. A quarter of a century of commitment to the field and the people of DH, including a landmark conference in Duisburg, SILFI 2000, that brought together sections of the research community unaware of each other's existence, later CliP and, later still, the Leipzig European Summer University, are movements in a larger concerto of effort and action that are still unfolding.

Ergon and energéia. A last glance

Ergon and *energéia*, these words have accompanied her now for over 45 years and have aptly encapsulated her achievement, so far. Regarding *ergon*, she was certainly never one to shirk work. If some of the tools she used over the years have lost their swank and sunk into almost comic irrelevance (the IBM electric typewriter purchased for the first thesis in 1979; the pocket calculator for serious number-crunching; the card and rod make-do computer that was happily superseded by the real thing; the first printer as big as a Hammond Organ; the first IBM-compatible desktop with all of its 40MB hard disk; hours training with her eldest daughter a state of the art Kurzweil OCR scanner as big as a tractor to recognize print fonts; the very beginnings of the internet and the halcyon days of mailing list discussions before everyone got healthily sick of them), they were each and every one of them essential steps on the path to finding a fertile interface between the disciplines of the humanities and emerging digital knowledge environments. *Ergon* paired with *energéia* put whole university departments on the digital map, too, in Duisburg, Bremen and then in Leipzig, in the shape

of hardware and software wrenched from unwilling university administrations and forced onto almost pathologically resistant and ultimately thankless academic peers. An observer might have questioned whether it was worth it. This she never did.

Ergon and *energéia*. Newspaper language, dialect, the language of women and feminist linguistics, digital humanities, the printing revolution, the historic grammars and national languages, linguistic variety and society. Each and every one of these strands of the whole skein of her work is founded on a critical approach to social phenomena that has been an incontrovertible and omnipresent keystone of her action in public and private, something that goes back far and comes from incisive biographical events played out in choices, paths taken, paths deferred.

Her achievement, from those first encounters on the Seine over 40 years ago, has been a labour of decisive, transparent, honest practice at all times and in all places, in which solid virtues like diligence, modesty and perseverance were paired with uncommon stamina and enthusiasm to carry forward a vision of scientific rigour, interdisciplinary cooperation and transdisciplinary curiosity which it would be difficult to find in this rare combination anywhere.

Such an intellectual journey is never easy. Obstacles stand in the way, or are placed there, and the resistance comes from every direction: the old and the young, the arrivé*es and those arriving, the knowing and the ignorant, friend and foe. That is always a sorry story and it has many, so many chapters. And not one is worth a moment's notice.

The author of these pages, as must by now be apparent, saw these 45 years unfold, in many moments as sole witness and chronicler. I shall not hide the fact that some, much even of what Elly experienced, and this chronicler witnessed or participated in, was hard, sometimes even cruel, quite often bereft of any sense or reason. Much - I would like to think *more* - has been marvelous, triumphant, unforgettable. Life-changing and life-sustaining. And though Elly's children have not been introduced into this narrative, they are (and their numerous children in their turn), of course, the most important thing that has taken place. Who can doubt that? But this is not their place, it is hers.

If it is possible to help swell the applause and recognition so clearly deserved by this astonishing woman by offering this chronicle, that will have

been the greatest reward. She has already had a giant impact on people and people's projects. She has changed much and affected many people in countless ways, most palpably at an individual level of respect, support and affection given and received. She has changed my life (not enough, she will surely add) and will, I am sure, continue to do so. It is my hope.

The chronicler sees and is seen, as the sonnet tells:

*Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done:
Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
Are windows to my breast, where-through the sun
Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee*