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VOLUME 8

New Literary and Linguistic Perspectives  
on the German Language,  
National Socialism, and the Shoah

*Edinburgh German Yearbook*

## *Edinburgh German Yearbook*

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# Edinburgh German Yearbook

Volume 8

*New Literary and Linguistic  
Perspectives on the German Language,  
National Socialism, and the Shoah*

Edited by  
Peter Davies  
and  
Andrea Hammel



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# Introduction: The German Language, National Socialism, and the Shoah

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*Andrea Hammel, Aberystwyth University*

THERE IS SEEMINGLY NO ESCAPING the association of the language of Goethe with the language of Hitler. Whatever one may feel about the rather leaden cliché that juxtaposes Buchenwald and Weimar, the disciplines of cultural history, literary criticism, discourse analysis, “Sprachkritik,” and memory studies have all, in their various ways, contributed to a rich field of concepts (“Tätersprache,” “Sprache *des* Nationalsozialismus” vs. “Sprache *im* Nationalsozialismus,”<sup>1</sup> “unheimliche Heimat,”<sup>2</sup> and many others) that both describe and embody the ambivalent, uneasy status of the German language and its traditions after the Shoah.

“Sprachkritiker” such as Victor Klemperer suggested that the *Lingua Tertii Imperii* was a perversion of German that needed to be purged from the language in order to restore its healthy traditions. However, does the notion of “Nazi language” as an identifiably separate entity really hold water, or is it simply a form of linguistic purism analogous to the desire to construct a clear demarcation line between “Germans” and “Nazis”? Is the German language really so fraught with history and violence that constant vigilance and self-reflexivity are necessary, or is neutral or even innocent speech in German still possible in the post-Holocaust world? And do the descendants of victims and of perpetrators have comparable attitudes and responsibilities regarding language, or radically different ones?

The poet Gerschon Ben-David, who had survived the Holocaust as a child with non-Jewish foster parents, and continued to write in German in Israel after his emigration in 1947, wrote strikingly in the 1960s about a longing for authentic communication with non-Jewish Germans and a fear that this communication can only take place in a social context in which language is characterized by cliché and the legacy of the Nazi assault on truth. How possible is it to break old habits and start anew?



Du sagst ich schreibe für tote  
 aber wie du bin ich  
 ein versuch  
 am geläufigen wahn  
 neue schritte zu bemessen  
 doch der enteilende  
 schritt in das jetzt  
 findet sich nur im verbrauchten  
 text und mit anderen<sup>3</sup>

For Ben-David, Jewish and non-Jewish speakers of German have similar longings, but the language is both that which connects them and that which divides them. By contrast, Ruth Klüger demonstrates a very different understanding of language. Clear, courageous naming of the crimes of the Shoah, and in particular of the concrete places in which they were carried out, is possible, and indeed vital for honest communication and to honor the dead:

Sprich die Namen der Orte:  
 Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, Groß-Rosen.  
 Sprich sie deutlich und ohne zu stammeln,  
 wie man ein Streichholz entzündet  
 (kräftig, dem Zitternden bricht es),  
 um den Toten die Kerze zu weihn.<sup>4</sup>

German literary traditions are subject to questioning or rescue, depending on the perspective of the writer. In her poem “Früher Mittag” (1952), Ingeborg Bachmann exposes in echoes of the literary canon (here, Goethe’s “Der König in Thule” and Wilhelm Müller’s “Der Lindenbaum”) the complicity of the German tradition in Nazism, expressing fears about the return of the repressed National Socialist past:

Sieben Jahre später  
 fällt es dir wieder ein,  
 am Brunnen vor dem Tore,  
 blick nicht zu tief hinein,  
 die Augen gehen dir über.

Sieben Jahre später,  
 in einem Totenhaus,  
 trinken die Henker von gestern  
 den goldenen Becher aus.  
 Die Augen täten dir sinken.<sup>5</sup>

Here, even the poetic forms of Romanticism seem complicit. However, such anxiety is foreign to a writer like Wolf Biermann, whose Marxist view

of literary history allows him to construct a divide between progressive and regressive traditions, in order to create a space in which to work:

Mein Deutsch ist das von Hölderlin und Büchner und Heine und Rosa Luxemburg, es ist meine Muttersprache von Emma Biermann, es ist unsere Vatersprache von Bertolt Brecht und kein Schweinefraß, zusammengemanscht aus Abfällen von Bismarck, Hitler, Honecker, Blödel-Otto, Leni Riefenstahl, Mielke und Stolpe.<sup>6</sup>

The tension between a perceived need for hyper-reflexivity in language and a perceived imperative for plain naming and clear communication forms a starting point for this collection. Literary language, with its hypersensitivity to nuance, connotation, ambivalence, and the weight of its own history, is a subtle instrument in the hands of a writer committed to the ethical project of sensitizing us as readers to the consequences of unthinking speech, and critical writing—as the essays collected in this volume show—can contribute to this ethics of reflection and sensitivity.

Further contributions to the present volume show that other kinds of text—for example, private letters or life writing in various forms—can provide valuable insights into individuals' attitudes and experiences, and into how they interpret them. Discourse analysis and critical readings of autobiographical texts can expose the determining role of language in constructing an individual's social and private identities, as well as showing how both victims and perpetrators have employed the linguistic resources available to them to understand their identities within or outside the Third Reich, or in the post-Holocaust world.

The volume begins with two contributions that seek to intervene directly—polemically, and from very different positions—in current discussions about the legacy of National Socialism. Marko Pajević takes on negative stereotypes about German in the English-speaking world and, via a discussion of theories of language and “national character,” addresses the question of the role of German Studies scholars in counteracting such stereotypes. Next, Sylvia Degen explores critically the controversial politics of naming in the establishment of concentration camp memorials, arguing against the euphemistic nature of some standard labels.

These essays are followed by four pieces that explore, from various perspectives, the idea of German as “Tätersprache.” In their essays, Simone Schroth and Andrea Hammel discuss the attitudes of German-speaking refugees (in the Netherlands and the UK, respectively) towards their native German, while Geraldine Horan and Arvi Sepp reflect on the question of “Nazi language” from the perspective of private citizens' letters and of Victor Klemperer's language-critical work, respectively.

The next group of essays explores the anxious politics of representation in German literary language after the Shoah. Mary Cosgrove reflects on writers' employment of the literature of melancholy in the tradition of

literary *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, while Teresa Ludden, Jenny Watson, and Dora Osborne assess questions of language and representation in the work of Anne Duden, Herta Müller, and Reinhard Jirgl, respectively. This group is followed by two essays on words and music: James Parsons's piece on Hanns Eisler's critical re-workings of the German Romantic tradition in his *Hollywooder Liederbuch*, and Beate Müller and Ian Biddle's piece on multilingual strategies in Arnold Schoenberg's text for his cantata, *A Survivor from Warsaw*.

Finally, two pieces on translation round off the collection, demonstrating how the processes of translating and editing a text by a victim (Simon Ward on Jakob Littner) and a text by a perpetrator (Peter Davies on Rudolf Höß) involve compromises with the agendas of translators, editors, and intended readers.

There are many points of connection between the essays, as well as radically different views of similar questions: for example, questions of identity, exile, multilingualism, and the language of Romanticism are raised by several authors, and Victor Klemperer's work is discussed from a number of different angles. Some of the essays celebrate the German language, while others take up a more critical position. Several authors warn of the dangers of appropriating victims' voices for one's own purposes, while others explore ways of understanding the language of the perpetrators and their descendants. These essays are ultimately about the possibilities and limitations of communication, about self-reflexive and naïve language, and this collection participates in an ethical project that is the real responsibility of scholarship: that of speaking clearly, critically, and self-critically about the legacy of the Shoah, not only in the German language, and of clearing a space for the voices of the silenced to be heard.

We leave the last word to Gerschon Ben-David, whose work explores the tension between the desire for perfect communication between Jews and non-Jews who think and speak the same language, and an awareness of the pitfalls that await the unwary:

Du—ich wollte eine brücke bauen  
 richtungslos  
 über versengte seelen  
 schritt haltend  
 stolpere ich<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the contribution by Geraldine Horan in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> W. G. Sebald, *Unheimliche Heimat: Essays zur österreichischen Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Gerschon Ben-David, “An meine deutschen Freunde,” in *In den Wind werfen: Versuche um Metabarbarisches*, ed. Renate Birkenhauer and Otto Dov Kulka (Jerusalem: Straehleener Manuskripte Verlag, 1995), 47–49, here 48–49.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Klüger, “Im Käfig,” in *Zerreißproben: Kommentierte Gedichte* (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2013), 51.

<sup>5</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, “Früher Mittag,” in *Werke I*, ed. Christine Koschel, Inge von Weidenbaum, and Clemens Münster (Munich: Piper, 1983), 44.

<sup>6</sup> Wolf Biermann, “Jizchak Katzenelson, ein Jude,” in Itzhak Katzenelson and Wolf Biermann, *Dos lied vunem ojsgehargetn jidischm volk / Großer Gesang vom ausgerotteten jüdischen Volk* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1994), 7–29, here 9.

<sup>7</sup> Gerschon Ben-David, “An meine deutschen Freunde,” 49.



# German Language and National Socialism Today: Still a German “Sonderweg”?

*Marko Pajević, Royal Holloway, University of London*

GERMAN IS OFTEN CONSIDERED TO BE less a language, and more an assault, maybe particularly so in the United Kingdom. John Cleese gave evidence of this attitude in an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 26 May 2006 by saying that many English people, including him, think that German is a language that is barked, after having been conditioned by movies about English people escaping from German concentration camps.<sup>1</sup> Most European countries formed this impression of German as a barked, rather than spoken language, if not already from Wilhelmine Germany, at the latest during the Second World War, and the media have since perpetuated this stereotype, particularly the tabloid press, but also many films. The “barbaric German language” has become a stereotype that is difficult to get rid of, and I intend to show that this damages not only the German reputation globally but also German society itself, and indirectly other nations as well. Additionally, it is based on a generally false conception of language.

“Normalization” has been the key term for German politics and society over the past fifteen years: should we Germanists apply it to the German language as well or will we continue in our discourse, more or less consciously, to promote a German “Sonderweg”? What role should we adopt in a situation in which our student numbers are dwindling, our departments are threatened with closure, and German language and German history are largely negatively perceived?<sup>2</sup>

In this context, we cannot bypass the thorny issue of National Socialism and the effect it had and still has on German culture and language, or common ideas about them. I will first discuss the relation between language and society by drawing on the concepts developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt and Émile Benveniste, which are very useful for *thinking language*. By this unusual term, in analogy to the French “pensée du langage” or the German “Sprachdenken,” I want to stress the fact that thinking is done in language and that language is not only a tool. This will provide the foundation for the subsequent analyses of National Socialist language as well as a discussion of the consequences of

preconceptions about German language after National Socialism, abroad (denigration) and in Germany (“Sprachscham”). The results will shed some light on the mechanisms at stake and the role we play in them.

## Language and Society: Thinking Language

First of all, we should ask ourselves what we refer to when we speak of the German language. Does it exist as such? Is it the German spoken in Germany, in Austria, in Switzerland, or in northern Italy? If in Germany, do we refer to the German spoken in Hamburg, or in Bavaria? Is there no difference between the language spoken in the new *Länder* compared to the old Federal Republic, after forty years of separate history and very different conceptions of society? And even more so, can we compare the German of a professor of German literature to that of a construction worker, for instance? Are we referring to the official standard language, or dialect; and are we referring to written language, or spoken? There are probably also different attitudes concerning sociolects and dialects in different countries. In Germany, for instance, due to the long history of relative political independence of the different *Länder*, the dialect often transports positive associations of identity, regardless of class and social prestige; whereas in Great Britain, dialect can be more indicative of social class. Sociolects and dialects aside, what about history? Are we talking about the German of today or of 1940 or 1820? Is it the language of Goethe or of Hitler? There is obviously not one German language. What is a national language, then? How does it work? What does it do? And what is the individual’s relationship with the language community?

At least since the early nineteenth century and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), we know that different languages are not simply different signs to communicate the same ideas, as Aristotle believed, but that they are also the means of cognition, of thinking itself. We cannot think outside of language.<sup>3</sup> Today this is an acknowledged fact, not accepted by all but by most. Humboldt wanted to find “in der Eigenthümlichkeit ihres [der Sprache] Baues Hülfsmittel zur Erforschung und Erkennung der Wahrheit, und Bildung der Gesinnung, und des Charakters”<sup>4</sup> (IV:33). The way language is *articulated*—articulation is Humboldt’s key concept—shapes our mind, our being, and our world. Language is hence the “bildende Organ des Gedankens”; thinking is inherently inscribed in sound. Moreover, each language represents its own “Weltansicht,” its own realization of thinking, which is consequently manifest in the diversity of languages. According to Humboldt, the content of thinking is largely dependent on the form of language, inseparable from it (“Ein sehr bedeutender Theil des Inhalts jeder Sprache steht daher in so unbezweifelnder Abhängigkeit von ihr, dass ihr Ausdruck für ihn nicht mehr gleichgültig bleiben kann,” IV:21–22). Each language is therefore a different

worldview; a language is not only a means to represent a known truth, but a means to discover truth (IV:27). Each language shapes the perception of the world in different ways. And this can only function dialogically, in an essential dualism—it is inherently social (VI:26; cf. Trabant, “Die gebellte Sprache,” 69–71).

Even if theoretically most people would nowadays agree that we cannot separate thought and linguistic form, the consequences of this do not always seem to be taken into account. The French linguist Émile Benveniste (1902–76) convincingly demonstrated the absurdity of the separation of form and content in language. Outside of language it is impossible to define the content of thought; thought cannot exist but in language.<sup>5</sup> National Socialism was conceived of in the German language—is the German language therefore National Socialist? Well, the German of the National Socialists was, but this cannot be generalized to German language more broadly.

The categories of a language, then, define the framework of thought. This poses a problem, however: if different languages have different qualities, are perhaps some languages more suitable for thinking, or possibly more inclined towards inhuman thought than others? Both have been said stereotypically about German. Benveniste’s answer to this is clear: it is not the language itself that favors or hinders the activity of the mind, but rather the capacities of the individual, and the general cultural conditions (Benveniste, “Catégories de Pensée,” 74). The French poet, translator and linguist Henri Meschonnic (1932–2009) denies the interaction between language and individual to be determining, but considers it to be “the action of discourse on language [*langue*], and of language on discourse; of literature on language, and of language on literature; of culture on language, and of language on culture.”<sup>6</sup> This implies that national languages (*langue*) as such simply do not exist in life; language always becomes manifest as used language (*langage*), spoken by one person in a particular historical situation. It is always in *interaction*—Humboldt used this term, “Wechselwirkung,” as a key concept—and consequently language is a continuous process, constantly subject to change.

Admittedly, in every moment of speech we take part in a battle between the force of the conventions of language and the force of the speaking subject who can counter these conventions and indeed becomes subject of her or his speech exactly in this act, in speaking his or her own individual language. As Jürgen Trabant has written, we should not consider this process as being full of constraints, but as being rich in possibilities.<sup>7</sup> It keeps the future open.

Benveniste’s notion of *discourse* is key, if we want to understand what happens in language: he defines discourse as “language as it is appropriated by the person speaking, and in the condition of *intersubjectivity*.”<sup>8</sup> This implies that language only manifests itself in the form of



discourse. He thereby places himself in the tradition of Humboldt, who said “Die Sprache liegt nur in der verbundenen Rede, Grammatik und Wörterbuch sind kaum ihrem todtten Gerippe vergleichbar” (VI.1:147). Consequently, there can be no national language (*langue*)—that is an abstraction. There is always and only the language spoken by the individual and manifest in discourse.

The identity of language and thinking has to be considered as such: our thinking is identical with our language, but with “*langage*,” not “*langue*”—it all depends on what we make of our national language in each moment of speech, “*parole*,” and here we have infinite options. It is an error to attribute certain qualities to a language. These qualities are always in the subject that is speaking—even though of course a tradition of thought in a culture facilitates certain ideas and obstructs others. But these things are only to a very small degree linguistic issues in a narrow sense. Even if different languages might have concepts that allow for thinking property or subjectivity in different ways and therefore for developing different conceptions, this can still always be countered and changed. Language has to be considered historically and culturally.

This *thinking language* is the foundation of our profession: teaching Modern Languages, we have to keep in mind what it means to develop an additional worldview and we have to pass this on to our students and to society as a whole. If that were more widely acknowledged, nobody would ask for any further justification of our existence.

## Stereotypes of the German Language

Everything depends on the meaning we give to it. We can continue to stress the putatively anal character of the Germans and of German language by pointing at the Germans’ focus on scatology in cursing, but we can also interpret this fact as a reluctance to use sexual metaphors in a negative way.<sup>9</sup> In English, something unpleasant provokes the swear-word “fuck,” yet nobody accuses all English-speakers of being sexually perverted. And does it not seem rather healthy to connect the unpleasant to shit rather than to sex?<sup>10</sup> As so many thinkers—such as Humboldt and, following him, Wittgenstein and Jaspers—have pointed out, it is not language but its use that is decisive. Our conception of a language is determined by the historical context.

The problem of ignoring this becomes obvious in the sketch of the comedian Tim Allen, who mocks German by first sarcastically calling it a beautiful poetic language, and then offering unflattering comparisons: he gently pronounces “butterfly,” “papillon,” and “mariposa,” then suddenly delivers an aggressively screamed “Schmetterling.” He comments that in German, even butterflies are afraid of their name.<sup>11</sup> People find that funny; it serves all the clichés. Germans are an easy target for such

jokes. But obviously, when the German word “Schmetterling” is perceived as aggressive as opposed to the gentle “butterfly” or “papillon” or “mariposa,” that is not for inherent, objective linguistic or acoustic reasons, but the result of the audience’s conditioning. It is in the perception, not in the language, and is related to associations and representation. Of course, in the imagined mouth of the inhumane SS-officer, “Schmetterling” becomes a threatening sound, but it does not in the mouth of a joyful German child. Of course, the world does not hear many joyful German children speak German, but they do hear the SS-officers, or the standardized representation of them, in films. The English word “butterfly” would be just as frightful in the mouth of the cliché-Nazi. The character of a language is not in the language but in the person who speaks that language.

It is interesting to note that in recent films by Quentin Tarantino the cliché receives another twist. The SS-officer in *Inglourious Basterds*, played by the Austrian Christopher Waltz, speaks not only an extremely elaborate and gentle German, he masters French, English, and Italian to the same degree of finesse. Of course, this multilingual, cultivated German is defeated by the American soldier chasing down the evil Nazis, an American who is not only incapable of speaking any word in any other language, but also exhibits poor language skills in American English. But Tarantino makes up for this in his following film *Django Unchained* by having the same Christopher Waltz playing, in the same cultivated manner, this time a good German appalled by the brutal racism in the south of the United States of America at the time before the Civil War.

What these Tarantino films render evident to a mass public is that stereotypes about nations depend very much on the historical situation, and that no nation should forget about their own crimes. There is no doubt that each time period develops certain speech patterns and a certain dominant character of speech. In the case of Germany, this character was certainly very different in the thirties and forties from nowadays. In spite of comparisons made in the recent economic crisis and Germany’s unpopular role in it in some countries, there is simply no common ground between Merkel’s way of speaking and Hitler’s.

It is also telling that the world always complains about the Germans having no sense of humor because they do not laugh at jokes made at their own expense. After having been repeatedly associated with inhumane SS-men when abroad—as has happened more or less jokingly many times even to me, and I am not of a very German “breed”—it is difficult not to be tired of it. Robin Williams makes of this lack of humor a typical German feature, relating the humorless reaction of a German interviewer when he told her that there are probably no funny people in Germany since “you” have all killed them.<sup>12</sup> Sure, one could react by making another joke, but would Robin Williams himself be amused

placed in that position? Would he deem it funny to be accused of having killed the American Indians?

In previous times, the image of Germany was very different. The most famous example would be Madame de Staël's very influential book *De l'Allemagne* at the start of the nineteenth century, where the Romantic Germany is presented as the counterpart to Napoleonic France.<sup>13</sup> At the time, France was characterized by action and lack of thought, as opposed to a Germany full of thought, but with a lack of action. Cultural stereotypes, then, are related to the political situation. The status of a language and the political power of its country are always connected. The dominant role of English in our times is not a result of the inherent qualities of the English language, but of the British Empire, and of American hegemony. Such an awareness of the historicity of our ideas, as well as an outside perspective on ourselves, can be passed on in Modern Languages—this is also part of our task as Germanists.

### Nazi German and Its Analysis

Since language is a historical phenomenon, political systems do leave their imprint on a language. It is worthwhile to read Victor Klemperer's famous book *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (*LTI*),<sup>14</sup> instead of simply using the title as a buzzword. Klemperer singles out interesting linguistic transformations of German that resulted from National Socialist usage, for instance the proliferation of acronyms for organizations (such as BDM, HJ, DAF, etc: *LTI*, 15), and the transformative use of certain adjectives, such as "fanatisch," which in its frequent repetition in the meaning of "heroic" or "virtuous" finally led people to believe in the identity of heroism and fanaticism (*LTI*, 21). Klemperer also points at the mechanisms at play, the general standardization of every written word so that they entered the minds of the people and their way of speaking and therefore thinking (*LTI*, 18). This was done to such an extent that he predicted some characteristic Nazi expressions would remain part of the German language for a long time, such as "charakterlich," or "kämpferisch" (*LTI*, 20). Even the Germans who cursed Nazism at the end of the war did so using its language, which shows how much the *LTI*, the Language of the Third Reich, penetrated German society (*LTI*, 296). According to Klemperer, it was not the individual use of language that had an effect but this constant repetition. Through the unconscious perception of those terms, phrases, and constructions, "der Nazismus glitt in Fleisch und Blut der Menge über" (*LTI*, 21). He concludes: "Aber Sprache dichtet und denkt nicht nur für mich, sie lenkt auch mein Gefühl, sie steuert mein ganzes seelisches Wesen, je selbstverständlicher, je unbewußter ich mich ihr überlasse" (*LTI*, 21). By transforming the associations of words and by incorporating them into their ideology, the Nazis used language to serve

their goals (*LTi*, 22). Klemperer demonstrates various forms of language transformation used by the Nazis in pursuit of their goals: next to adoption and inversion, we can name for instance conceptual clusters, binary definitions, essentialization and exclusion, as well as contradiction.<sup>15</sup>

Referring to Talleyrand's aphorism that language is a means to conceal one's thoughts, Klemperer argues the contrary: "Was jemand willentlich verbergen will, sei es nur vor andern, sei es vor sich selber, auch was er unbewußt in sich trägt: die Sprache bringt es an den Tag" (*LTi*, 16). Whereas a statement might be a lie, the style of language discloses the real meaning. Unfortunately, we cannot rely on this either, but there is some truth to Klemperer's point. As the subtitle *Notizbuch eines Philologen* explicitly indicates, *LTi* is written by a philologist: a lover of language. Similarly, the motto, taken from Franz Rosenzweig, "Sprache ist mehr als Blut" demonstrates Klemperer's belief in the power of language, as well as in the possibilities and blessings of a conscious use of language. He sees his task in rendering people conscious of the poisonous effects of the *LTi*. He claims that German needs to be purified of this kind of language, that some words will have to be buried for a long time, some even forever (*LTi*, 22). The criticism of language is indeed a necessary and noble task and we should all, always and everywhere, pursue it.

Klemperer is of course not completely free of contamination; he makes, for instance, an unconscious use of the biological metaphor of the German "Volkskörper" (*LTi*, 61) that certainly belongs to the *LTi*, and later on, in his life in the GDR, against his convictions, he gave in to some of the linguistic norms of the new system by applauding Stalin and the FDJ (Freie Deutsche Jugend—Free German Youth, the youth organization of the GDR).<sup>16</sup> But this does not invalidate his point. More problematic and misleading is the idea of the *perversion of a language*, since this term of perversion implies a core or a natural state of the language that would be pure and innocent, and could be perverted for base goals. No language has such an essence. Language can be cultivated in order to develop certain traditions of thought so that these ideas are more easily thought in this specific cultural environment—that is all. Our judgment of these things, too, is always rooted in our own historical position.

All studies of Nazi German are in agreement that its specificity cannot be found in German linguistic structures, but in a particular use of the German language, in its application to certain situations and thus in conveying certain ideas. This becomes very clear in the other famous early study of the issue: *Aus dem Wörterbuch eines Unmenschen*.<sup>17</sup> Here too, the philologist's point of view becomes immediately manifest in Dolf Sternberger's preface of 1945:

Soviel und welche Sprache einer spricht, soviel und solche Sache,  
Welt oder Natur ist ihm erschlossen. Und jedes Wort, das er redet,

wandelt die Welt, worin er sich bewegt, wandelt ihn selbst und seinen Ort in dieser Welt. Darum ist nichts gleichgültig an der Sprache, und nichts so wesentlich wie die *façon de parler*. Der Verderb der Sprache ist der Verderb des Menschen. (Sternberger, *Wörterbuch*, 7)

Sternberger says that we live in a world made of language and that we are ourselves constituted by language—this grants the philologist the outstandingly important role of keeping watch over its use. The destiny of humankind depends on it. This sounds melodramatic, but the point is correct. Human beings' access to the world—that is, the human, meaningful world—is through language. Sternberger formulates it this way: “Es gibt keine vorsprachliche Menschenwelt” (Sternberger, *Wörterbuch*, 286). We do not have any other access to the world apart from through language, and we should therefore be careful of how we use it since this determines our world. Sternberger also notices in the prefaces to the later editions (of 1957 and 1967) that the inhumane use of language persists, and he claims that the “Unmensch” has always existed, even before 1933, and always will. His dictionary treats terms such as “Anliegen,” “Herausstellen,” “Intellektuell,” “Problem,” “Schulung,” etc.; what is at stake is clearly not the words as such but their use in a specific historical situation.

Sternberger, a professor of political science, positions himself in the tradition of Humboldt's theory of language, which was at the time probably better known in Germany than it is now, and he refers explicitly to Humboldt at several points. He echoes what Humboldt says about nations: “Ihre Sprache ist ihr Geist, und ihr Geist ist ihre Sprache—man kann sich beide nie identisch genug denken!” (Sternberger, *Wörterbuch*, 286) In this context, he tells the anecdote about Carl von Ossietzky conceiving of the following punishment for the Nazis: “Deutsch müssen sie lernen!” (285) This is supposed to mean that this would stop them being Nazis—which is not true, of course. The Nazis spoke German, their German. Yet Ossietzky had a point, even if his view of the German language is clearly idealized. Nonetheless, the language we speak represents our being. Sternberger also states: “Obgleich der Mensch die Sprache nicht geschaffen hat, hat er doch seine jeweilige Sprache zu verantworten” (312). As Jaspers said: “Sprache ist im Sprechen.”<sup>18</sup>

Sternberger also sees very clearly that language is not only an expression of something but also forms the situation; he stresses the creative aspect of language:

Und die Sprache ist nicht bloß ein Erzeugnis der Gesellschaft, sondern ebenso sehr eine gesellschaftliche Bilde-Kraft. Sie hinkt nicht hinter den “Verhältnissen” her, als wären diese ihr unweigerlich vorgegeben, sondern sie wirkt fortwährend auf die “Verhältnisse” ein. Diese Dialektik gibt uns auch eine Chance. (334)

There is reason for hope, then. The Germans are not doomed as a result of the Nazis' use of the German language. Changing people's minds and their language is not an easy process; it takes time as well as cultural and political measures. The Germans also renounced certain expressions and formulations after the Allies forced them to.<sup>19</sup> There is an immense variety of reasons why and how a society changes.

## The German "Sprachscham" and Its Consequences

Literature is one of these reasons. Reading and writing, of course, hugely influences people. It shapes their language and therefore their thinking, their outlook on life and the world, their being. It is debatable who shapes the world more—politicians or writers. People like Kafka are still shaping the universe of many readers all around the world. Even though undoubtedly literature has lost its role as a "Leitmedium," it is still important, and always will be, due to its creative work on language.

Paul Celan is often named as one of the authors who tried to purify German after 1945. He stated in his 1958 speech upon accepting the Bremen Literature Prize that the German language passed through "die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede," and reappeared "angereichert" by all of this, that is, by the "tausendjährige Reich" (he put "angereichert" in quotation marks himself).<sup>20</sup> Yes, German language and society are burdened by this experience; they consist of many layers and it is crucial to be aware of what we refer to with the words we use. Celan achieved much in this respect. Even though he could barely stand being in Germany, he continued to write in German and insisted on the uniqueness of the mother tongue.

The often-evoked dilemma of the identity of "Muttersprache" and "Mördersprache" fits his situation.<sup>21</sup> His mother, who taught him the love of the German language and literary tradition, was killed by the Nazis. Maybe it needs to be said explicitly: German is also the idiom of a major portion of the victims of National Socialism. It is not only the language of the perpetrators; it is also the language of many of the victims.

Thomas Mann insisted on "the other Germany." The two sides of Germany's Faustian aspiration were also the topic of his *Doktor Faustus*.<sup>22</sup> During the war, he appealed to the Germans to refer to other strands of tradition. That is possible; our identity depends on our choices, and in any culture there are options. And, finally, culture is a matter of *discourse* in Michel Foucault's sense of the term—the result of the way a community talks about things.<sup>23</sup>

But, indeed, many dissociated themselves from the German language, even from German names. Jean Améry, formerly Hanns Chaim Mayer, is the best example; he wrote: "Das Kartoffelacker- und Ruinen-Deutschland war für mich eine versunkene Weltregion. Ich vermied es,

seine, meine Sprache zu sprechen, und wählte ein Pseudonym romanischer Resonanz.”<sup>24</sup> Améry was a victim, a Jew tortured by the Nazis, a man with the intellectual resources to go abroad and live in another language. However, he chose to write in German afterwards.

But how about the large number of Germans who lived through the time of National Socialism, more or less involved, not necessarily followers or at least not active perpetrators, but also not victims of this ideology? How were they able to position themselves, once the enormous responsibility had been acknowledged?

It is maybe a unique case that a society aspires to dissociate from its tradition and language to such an extent, as if to free itself from the burden of history and gain an innocence impossible for the German language. As a result, the Germans are certainly inclined to use English more than many other nations, English being not only the language of the victors and of modern life, but also a language that is not guilt-ridden, a language that clears and cleanses German speakers of the national catastrophe and internationalizes them. Another reason why Germans embraced English so willingly is that they simply did not know how to define a German identity. There was a vacuum after 1945, when the version of German identity that had been dominant became unacceptable and all traditions seemed tainted by National Socialism. Since the Nazis were so good at incorporating all cultural movements, virtually no aspect of German culture remained untouched.

At the start of the twentieth century, 44% of all publications worldwide in the sciences were in German. From this leading position, the percentage was reduced by 1996 to only 1.2%. The First World War started the decline of German as an international language of academia because the international research community boycotted German until 1926, due to German academics' support of the war. The Second World War and the Nazi atrocities then completely destroyed the German language on an international level. Nowadays, most German academics, if they want to get international recognition, are obliged to publish in English.<sup>25</sup> But it is not only German academia that is increasingly renouncing the German language; even on an educational level the Germans seem keen to free themselves of their language. More and more schools teach, or intend to teach, some subjects in English; universities even more so. Many German enterprises in Germany opt to use English in their offices. English is omnipresent in German advertisements, often with quite comic effects: many Germans do not understand these messages correctly and believe, for instance, that the publicity slogan for Parfümerie Douglas, “Come in and find out,” means that you need to find your way out of the shop again. In addition, German is often shunned in Germany for public signposting. Instead of “Stadtmitte,” or at least “Zentrum,” in many cities one finds “City Center” on street signs. The discredit German has fallen into after



the Second World War made Germans particularly willing to give up their language in favor of the global English. Jürgen Trabant speaks of a “spezifische deutsche Sprachscham”; the Germans are traumatized by their crime, which was mediated by the German language.<sup>26</sup> Before National Socialism, says Trabant, Germans were proud to speak the language of Goethe; after it, they are aware that they are speakers of the “barked” language of the concentration camps. This, Trabant asserts, still influences language policies. He cites the example of German politicians speaking English at a conference of German language teachers outside of Germany, even answering questions in English despite the fact that they are posed in German by a public that speaks little English. This indicates identity issues even if we keep in mind that German never developed a tradition as a language of diplomacy; it was only Bismarck, for instance, who asked his ambassadors to write their reports in German and even the peace treaty with defeated France in 1871 was exclusively written in French.

This “Sprachscham,” however complex its reasons might be, has considerable consequences. If Germans are taught at schools and universities in English, they do not learn certain discourses in their mother tongue. To talk for instance about National Socialism in English would have the side effect that the Germans would not have to identify too much with it; they would gain some distance from German history. But it also weakens the capacities of expression in German if high discourses, academic research and education first and foremost, no longer take place in German anymore. Future generations will not be able to accurately express in German those things they only learned in English—and it remains doubtful whether many of them will be able to express them well in English.

German as a standard and high-level language loses significance, warns Trabant, when English takes over these discourses. Consequently, there will be, on the one hand, a strengthening of dialects as the familiar language, which implies a regionalization and, on the other hand, a strengthening of English as the language of work and the high-level language. For German as a national standard language, fewer and fewer tasks and functions remain—it risks getting lost between dialects and English. As Karl-Heinz Göttert indicates, most linguists in recent years have concluded that due to national media and mobility, dialects are declining.<sup>27</sup> Yet, at the same time, there is also a renaissance of dialects, mostly in the south, because in a globalized world, the desire for a feeling of home and belonging is growing. However, as Göttert suggests, it seems to be less the dialects and more the colloquial language that is on the rise.

Whatever the power relations between dialect, high, and colloquial German might be, the situation may lead to an intellectual impoverishment for many, since those students who do not do very well in English will have less access to higher discourses. As a result, the gap between the



well-educated and the less well-educated will widen. A small elite will distinguish itself by good knowledge of English—but even they will always have a disadvantage on the international level compared to native speakers of English.

The common German-language area will disappear—we can observe this already in Switzerland, for instance, where Swiss German is taking over many discourses that were formerly held in standard German. Other high-level discourses are dealt with in English. The same phenomenon exists within Germany: in Baden-Württemberg, an extremely successful publicity campaign for the “Ländle” from 1999 to 2010 claimed: “Wir können alles außer Hochdeutsch.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, the prime minister at the time, Günther Oettinger, wanted to introduce English as the language of the office. That means that in Baden-Württemberg the people would speak Swabian, possibly colloquial German, with family and friends, and English at work. Standard German would not be spoken anywhere; the German-language community would cease to exist.

These tendencies are characteristic of a country where identity was traditionally built not on political structures, but on the common language area. Consequently, without this common language area, there is no need for common political structures, nor even for Germany itself. “Nie wieder Deutschland” seems finally realized, as Trabant comments sarcastically. At least, the space for high German seems to be shrinking.

This weakening of the national language also creates problems for the integration of immigrants, a process that is increasingly important. In Germany these groups have until relatively recently not been offered sufficient opportunities to learn German, even after it became obvious that these immigrants were going to stay. One reason for this might be that, after National Socialism, the German state does not want ever again to force its culture upon anyone. As opposed to France, for example, which has no inhibitions in this respect, Germany does not aggressively promote the teaching of the German language.

But the intended multicultural plurilingualism in Germany requires real cultivation from all sides of both languages, German and the family language. However, in spite of some initiatives, institutions do not provide sufficient support for either language, and the necessary interaction and cultural exchange often remain limited, leading to discontent or indifference.<sup>29</sup> The weakening of the status of German worsens the situation: if immigrants are supposed to speak English at work, their exposure to German is diminished even further. Furthermore, they would not be able to learn good English at a German school if they do not speak good German.

In an effort to gain political and historical innocence, the consequences of German language policies are an impoverishment of culture, social tensions on various levels, and the cessation of cultural cohesion

and cultural identity. This attitude towards German language is not only a problem for Germany, but can become one also for other nations. Germany, a handy scapegoat, can serve to keep them from facing their own issues. Compared to Nazi Germany, any nation is a paragon of virtuousness. The roles are distributed; we all know who the bad guys were, so “we,” the others, are by default the good ones. No need for further reflection or even self-criticism.

If this then translates into neglecting the study of German language and culture, the world as a whole also loses out. It is hardly even possible to think of the contemporary western world without German traditions. German traditions of thought and of all the arts shaped our world to a considerable degree. Without German, that is, without access to these sources in the original, people outside the German-speaking world are deprived of these sources. Translations do not exist sufficiently and are always to a certain degree adaptations into another system of thought and into another worldview, as we have seen at the start. They are not the same as the originals.

German used to be the international language of philosophy and many of the sciences; this should still be the major motivation for learning German. The economy will always be a factor, of course; in moments of crisis, people would even consider learning German if that means getting a job. But generally, everybody believes that you can do business with Germans in English. This is not necessarily true, not only because of what Chancellor Willy Brandt once famously said: “If I’m selling to you, I speak your language. If I’m buying, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen.”<sup>30</sup> Nobody wants to learn German for Germany’s beaches and relaxed lifestyle in the sun (even though Germany does also offer beautiful beaches and a relaxed lifestyle, albeit less often in the sun). The idea of language learning as part of cultural enrichment and intellectual expansion needs to be promoted; the general public, politicians, students and often even university senior management do not seem to be much aware of this dimension of language learning. So if we do not want more Modern Languages Departments to be closed, or possibly replaced by Language Centers, we have to bring this message across.

## Conclusions

After the Third Reich, it was indeed necessary and beneficial for German culture to be obliged to put itself under scrutiny to a degree that might be unequalled in history. Germany developed a considerable culture of self-awareness. Of course, this is a never-ending process, and there is also the risk of this introspection becoming one-sided. By focusing too much on one aspect of history, a society might be considered under too narrow a perspective and other important elements might be neglected.