

## Literature / Philosophy

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### **"Language is a Fundamental Aspect of Being Human"**

The (borderline) publisher Lojze Wieser has championed small-scale and unknown literature from Austria's eastern neighbours for two decades and also founded the "Enzyklopädie des europäischen Ostens" (Encyclopedia of the European East). For Wieser communication in one's own native language is a human right that should be granted to everyone. In conversation with Antje Mayer.

"I believe if we were to carry out a comparative study of European literatures – not using only the great imperial literatures as an indicator – but making an unconventional cut through these literatures, somewhat like an archaeological excavation, i.e. cutting through the layers, examining them and then placing these literatures over each other, that we could discover a great number of similarities, only some of which are not concurrent. And, like a geologist examining such a cross-section, we could then explore the souls of the people in these regions." (Lojze Wieser in his book "Die Zunge reicht weiter als die Hand", Vienna 2004, p.79)

**Antje Mayer:** within the EU there is an imbalance, indeed even a hierarchy of languages: the major languages, such as English, German and French, are displacing the minor ones. Has much changed in this respect since the recent eastern enlargement of the EU? After all, around 50 languages are spoken in the western areas of the European Union but already twice as many in the eastern regions.

**Lojze Wieser:** We permit ourselves this arrogance because we genuinely feel more important. It is understandable that the smaller languages are paid less attention but they are, of course, in no way inferior to the major ones. In fact they are often more differentiated and more vivid in their imagery.

But we can hardly be expected to learn all EU languages to be able to converse with each other?

I believe in the idea of a communicative language, which the ubiquitous English already is. Parallel to this I insist upon each individual's democratic right to an interpreter who allows him express himself in his own native language in a precise and differentiated way, if this individual regards it as necessary. By taking this kind of dual approach we could counter the power of the major languages. The investment needed would amount to only a minimum of what would be saved through avoiding conflicts. If we are truly aware of the consequences of the language problem the argument that this is unaffordable seems ludicrous.

Do you think that the influential languages consciously "promote their own cause" or give themselves preferential treatment, after all, language has always also meant the exercise of power?

Why, in many cases, can we still not write emails using the special characters that are an

important part of many Slav languages? Restrictions of this kind are like amputating a language. You only need to look at which countries are behind the development of such technologies. For instance, the availability of special characters for French is not a problem, but it remains one for Slav languages. Is it not a question of respect and humility to spell a person's name the way it is written in their native language?

In the course of a talk I gave in Munich in 1990 in front of 100 publishers and journalists I made the comparison that, since 1945, approximately 1,500 Polish works have appeared in the Federal Republic of Germany but, in contrast, in the space of 200 years hardly one and a half books per year from the South Slav region, that is works in the Slovene, Croatian, Serbian and Macedonian languages, have been translated into another language.

A gentleman in a leading position in the German book trade laconically remarked: "You mustn't forget Mr Wieser, we have economic interests in Poland". This is the clearest and most unambiguous answer.

But isn't it better all the same that people communicate in a few common languages, rather than not communicating at all? I know from my daily work as an editor just how expensive and time-consuming good translations can be.

There is no doubt that we need a communicative level of language. Communicative languages include, for example, English or Italian but also Russian, Serb or Croatian. After all, half of the population of the EU are Slavs and their native languages are closer to the latter languages mentioned above. The so-called minority languages are the majority in the EU and the so-called majority languages form the minority. There are a good 200 living languages in the EU and there are, on average, four minorities in each EU country.

In view of these facts perhaps it is appropriate to ask: in what language do we want and will we be allowed to communicate in the EU in the future? How can everybody be equally entitled to convey expressively their needs or feelings, how can they be enabled to exchange opinions with a sense of well-being?

Up to the present it seems that, within the EU – particularly in its eastern areas – an agreement has been reached to use English. If a website doesn't appear in English it might as well not exist at all, for all practical purposes. In view of the present political course of the dominant English-speaking nations, such as the USA and Great Britain, should we not deliberately boycott their language?

I don't think much of negative strategies. They only restrict energy. English is practical. But we cannot accept that people seriously discuss whether 1500 English words might suffice for communication throughout the whole of Europe.

I think I don't need to especially emphasize that such an approach contains an enormous explosive force. In recent years we have witnessed the conflicts that different cultures and languages can foster. Look for example at the Basque country, Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania or Ireland. Language has a greater influence on psychosocial behaviour than we were previously willing to admit when planning our political strategies. And it is, at the same time, one of the basic aspects of being human. We must give languages the importance they deserve and learn not to aid and abet chauvinism and megalomania.

Does dealing with the language problem in Europe really depend upon a handful of dedicated people such as yourself as a publisher and translator of Slovene and other smaller Eastern European literatures?

I am afraid so. For example, when I started off as a publisher in 1980 there was not a single Slovene book in the German language easily available. By now, under my direction, a good

fifty books have been published and 400 authors have been presented in translation in the series "Europa Erlesen". Due to the fact that Drava-Verlag and Hermagoras / Mohorjeva (two publishers) have followed suit, twice as many books have been translated in the last 25 years as during the entire earlier history of Slovene literature.

But there is no sense in just encouraging translations and then thinking they will sell like hot cakes. They need additional promotional activities. Authors must be sent on book-reading tours, press and publicity work must be carried out; interviews organized and publications about the authors must be produced. But there is no doubt that there has been a move throughout society: the market value of literature in Slavic languages has risen in recent years, not least due to massive capital expenditure on the part of the publishers themselves.

But let's not fool ourselves. As far as I know in Slovakia, in Hungary, in Serbia in Ukraine and in Belarus the situation regarding the translation of literature is even worse than in Slovenia.

Is there a uniform strategy within the EU as regards language?

Not that I am aware of. There is a need for a long-term system. I have a suggestion that might be useful: a European exchange library. Each country initially translates one book per year into the languages recognized as official EU languages. If we start with 21 languages, for example, then, with 25 countries, that would be 525 books per year. If this were continued for a number of years (which would represent a relatively minor expense) we would have an unequalled opportunity to discover different cultures. Entire branches and professions, such as publishers, translators and editors would be helped and would no longer be forced to translate every piece of rubbish.

In regions with linguistic minorities – and we have seen that there are no countries without minorities – films should be subtitled. Popular radio programmes should also be broadcast in minority languages and the regional print media should publish summaries in these languages. This would tend to make their manifold use a matter of course, encourage linguistic and cultural diversity and, as a consequence, would raise the intellectual level in general.

Will the language problem not eventually solve itself? Multi-ethnic families from all social groups are today almost the norm. Many children of emigrants grow up bi-lingual and usually learn English as well at school. Those who benefit from higher education even learn two or three more languages.

That's true. Our eleven year old daughter has two main languages, Slovene and German, and at the moment she is learning Italian and English at school. This is wonderful! We can learn far more languages than we believe. Recent brain research shows that, until the second and third year of its life, a child can store languages in a single centre, i.e. learn them simultaneously, by laying them over each other like stencils and comparing them. When we are older we create a centre in our brain for each language. This makes things more difficult and we can compare languages with each other only by means of complicated processes.

Does this mean we can look forward to a bright future?

As an optimist I am at the same time also a pessimist. Let's look at Slovene literature, for example. Slovene writers have developed so much that is independent and innovative, surreal and real, so much intuition and memory, they have all looked at a Europe that has taken so little note of them and they have given this Europe something that it scarcely

wanted to accept.

And yet the writing has been done and literature has had its influence on all those changes that have taken place, without which we could not today speak of a Renaissance of eastern European literature in German-speaking Europe. For decades political borders have determined cultural boundaries and they still continue to do so, but perhaps a few gaps have been opened in them.

Carinthian Slovene Lojze Wieser was born in 1954 and has published books since 1979. From 1981 to 1986 he was director of Drava-Verlag. Since 1987 he has run his own company Wieser-Verlag, which produces, among other works, the popular series "Europa Erlesen" (80 volumes to date).

In 2004 his book "Die Zunge reicht weiter als die Hand. Anmerkungen eines Grenzverlegers" ("The Tongue Reaches Further than the Hand, Remarks of a Borderline Publisher"), selected and revised by Barbara Maier, Franz V. Spechtler and Peter Handke appeared in Czernin Verlag, Vienna.