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Philosophical Grammar versus Grammatical Philosophy

Nietzsche and Leibniz on Grammar

Speaking to philosophers from the point of view of an anthropologist/linguist Edward Sapir had this advice for them:

»Few philosophers have deigned to look into the morphologies of primitive languages nor have they given the structural peculiarities of their own speech more than a passing and perfunctory attention. When one has the riddle of the universe on his hands, such pursuits seem trivial enough, yet when it begins to be suspected that at least some solutions of the great riddle are elaborately roundabout applications of the rules of Latin or German or English grammar, the triviality of linguistic analysis becomes less certain. To a far greater extent than the philosopher has realized, he is likely to become the dupe of his speech-forms, which is equivalent to saying that the mould of his thought, which is typically a linguistic mould, is apt to be projected into his conception of the world. Thus innocent linguistic categories may take on the formidable appearance of cosmic absolutes. If only, therefore, to save himself from philosophic verbalism, it would be well for the philosopher to look critically to the linguistic foundations and limitations of his thought.«[1]

Sapir's warning calls the attention of philosophers on the very fact that we always »philosophize in tongues«, use words of a given language as concepts and obey a certain grammar when making our arguments: Words matter, and so does the grammar of the idiom we use in philosophical arguments.

1. Words Matter: The Malebrache / Condillac Controversy

In his *Traité des Systèmes*, Etienne Bonnot, Abbe de Condillac (1714–1780), philosopher of sensationalism (a Lockean whose starting point

[1] Sapir, »The grammarian and his language« (1924), in: Mandelbaum, David G. (ed.), *Selected writings of Edward Sapir on Language, Culture, and Personality*, p. 157.

is that all knowledge comes from the senses and there are no innate ideas and who himself indicated that his criticism of philosophers amounted to »teasing« (badinage) them) critically analyzes an argument made by Cartesian Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715), who compared our natural inclinations towards the good and the truth (»nos inclinations naturelles droites«) to natural physical movements. Thus his language allows him to use a metaphor implied in »inclinations droites« and substituing »straight movement« for »inclinations droites«. But can we draw a parallel between mental and physical movements? We can see that the language chosen may even have an impact on philosophical argumentations.

A general feature of sensationalist criticism of rationalist and innatist philosophers is to accuse them of verbalism in the sense that they would invoke entities that are in fact the sheer productions of the creative power of language beyond what is actually given. As the French phrase expresses it well »ils se paient de mots«, literally: *they reward themselves with words*. In this case Condillac's criticism is different. He remarks that this comparison depends on the fact that Malebranche expresses himself in French. Condillac's criticism is aimed at a particular aspect of Malebranche's core thesis that the ultimate cause of everything is God, so that what we call causes, in the plural, are only *occasions* for God's unique agency: God burns through the occasion of fire. The main objection against occasionalism as the system is known (later on to be found in Al-Ghazali) is then to ask: if God is the general cause of all natural inclinations to be found in our minds, how can we account for the possibility of sin?

For Malebranche, the answer to such an objection takes the form of an analogy between the principle of inertia as a natural law of physics and what happens when our natural inclinations are deviated in the direction of wrongdoing. Condillac stresses that this is an aspect of the general analogy established earlier by Malebranche between matter's capacity to receive movement, the understanding's capacity to receive ideas, and the will's capacity to receive inclinations. Which for Condillac manifests that contrarily to his claim, the follower of Descartes has no clear and distinct idea of the notion of will if its explanation is by analogy. The answer to the objection is the following:

»in the same way that all movements follow a straight line if they do not encounter some extraneous and particular cause that determine them and

change them into curved lines by opposing them, all inclinations that we received from God are straight and could not have any other end than the possession of the good and the truth, were it not for some extraneous cause which would determine what was impressed upon us by nature towards bad ends.« To which Condillac simply responds: »What would have Malebranche done if that metaphorical expression ›*straight inclinations*‹ had not been French?«[2]

I will not examine the discussion in any detail as that is not the point here. What I am interested in are the following two points:

Condillac calls Malebranche's attention to the fact that he is speaking French and that the peculiarities of that language *incline* him to think according to the possibilities they present. But there is nothing necessary and universal in those peculiarities, by definition. If philosophy does not leave anything unexamined, we need to pay attention to the fact that a given language in which we happen to philosophize inclines us to think in a certain unexamined way.

The second point is implicit in Condillac's criticism. The implication is an invitation to always *translate*, test our arguments by translating them into another language in order to measure how sound they are, in a way that would mean ›independently from the particular language we think in‹. So Condillac is in some respect asking Malebranche to translate his statement into a language in which ›straight‹ cannot be used in the metaphorical sense upon which it rests. Of course that does not mean actually performing the translation; the other language can be simply virtual (after all being monolingual is widespread even among philosophers). The injunction is about just being aware that there are out there many languages where the peculiar use of ›straight‹ is absent.

I generalize this as the following memento: think in the presence of the plurality of languages! In other words: remember that to philosophize is to speak a language among other languages, and that what you say should undergo the test of translation, the test of the

[2] « de même que tous les mouvements se font en ligne droite, s'ils ne trouvent quelques causes étrangères et particulières qui les déterminent, et qui les changent en des lignes courbes par leurs oppositions; ainsi, toutes les inclinations que nous avons de Dieu sont droites, et elles ne pourraient avoir d'autre fin que la possession du bien et de la vérité, s'il n'y avait une cause étrangère qui déterminât l'impression de la nature vers de mauvaises fins. Qu'aurait fait Malebranche, si cette expression métaphorique, *des inclinations droites*, n'avait pas été française? » Condillac, *Traite des systèmes*, p. 63.

foreign (to use Antoine Berman's title: *L'épreuve de l'étranger*).[3] Edouard Glissant famously declared: »J'écris en presence de toutes les langues du monde«[4] *(I write in the presence of all the languages of the world)*. In a way that is what Condillac's criticism amounts to. And this is the posture that Merleau-Ponty's notion of »lateral universal« invites philosophers to adopt.[5]

2. Philosophy and *Logos*

Of course philosophers have always known that the curse of Babel happened and that there are many languages. But there is also a strong belief in the *logos* that is both reason and language.[6] To philosophize is to speak the *logos* and establish one's separation from the languages of the so-called ›Barbarians‹. Is there a universal language of *logos* independent of languages? And is the logos incarnated in some preferred languages? When the plurality of languages is considered it is to ask if *the* logos, *the* language of philosophy can be incarnated in a given language. It is within such a framework that the Heideggerian concept of a historical language and his notion that philosophy speaks Greek (and now German) are to be understood. Cicero's premise that philosophy can also speak Latin is still a tribute paid to the notion of *the* language of philosophy being unquestionably Greek: what he is saying in his book *De finibus bonorum and malorum* is that his own Latin language is *also* or can *also* pretend to express the *logos*.

This is different from the notion coined by Barbara Cassin of »philosophizing in tongues« (a biblical expression which takes seriously our post-Babelian condition) which conveys the double idea that (1) before they are concepts, our concepts are words, they are

[3] Berman, *L'épreuve de l'étranger. Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique*.

[4] Glissant, « j'écris en présence de toutes les langues du monde » a lecture delivered at the *Congrès Eurozine,* November 10, 2008. Available at www.sens-public.org/article614.html.

[5] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, »From Mauss to Levi-Strauss«, in: Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, (Trans. Richard G. McCleary).

[6] Cassin, « l'énergie des intraduisibles. La traduction comme paradigme pour des sciences humaines », in *Philosopher en langues. Les intraduisibles en traduction*, p. 10. She writes (p. 10) that »the Latins translated impeccably as *ratio-et-oratio*« (p. 10).

»words in languages« *(mots en langues)*,[7] inscribed in languages; (2) »if universal there is (I am not so sure that the word is adequate), it is not an ›overarching‹ one but a ›lateral‹ one, and its name is translation.« When she writes that sentence, B. Cassin is quoting my identification of the »lateral universal« with translation. And in fact I am among those who work within the framework established by her *Dictionary of the Untranslatables*, those she refers to in her introduction to *Philosopher en langues* as »the 150 companions and friends for the journey of more than ten years who explored another kind of freedom and philosophical practice, at once more global and diversified, connected with words, with words in languages«.[8] The assumption that those »companions« share is that there is no logos standing in its universality and its separatedness. With the example of Condillac and his criticism of Malebranche, one isolated word was considered. The question of translation is expanded when we consider philosophical *statements* as they involve the very grammar of a language and not just the peculiar use of some words: *Being is, Not being is not* or *I think therefore I am* are such statements, for example.

Translation between Indo-European languages can be problematic. It is even more so when we are considering a non Indo-European language, in particular zero copula languages when dealing with those ontological statements. When Descartes says »I am, I exist«, establishing equivalence between the two, how do we translate his statement in a language where the absolute use of the verb ›to be‹ does not exist? Or does not in the same way? When you say »I am« in certain languages, you have to add »what«, »where«, in »what state«, »with whom«,[9] etc. Thus, Rwandan philosopher Alexis Kagame (1912–1981) has declared in his *La philosophie bantu comparée* that one could not translate Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* into Kinyarwanda language.[10] In fact there is always a way of rendering it, but the point he is making is that realizing that »I am« is an untranslatable could have opened up the question of the possibility of making an immediate move from »I think« to »I am« which is precisely a criticism that will be leveled at Descartes' cogito.

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[7] Cassin (ed.), *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies.Dictionnaire des Intraduisibles*.
[8] idem.
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[10] Kagamé, *La philosophie bantu comparée*, p. 126.

3. Grammar Matters: Logical Analysis of Language and philosophical Grammar in Leibniz

Is this the same as conducting a logical analysis of language according to the Leibnizian program of overcoming the saraband of our post Babel world by learning to go beyond the *surface grammar* of our languages and retrieve the true *grammar of thought* or of *understanding*, the one that Leibniz called »philosophical«, and of which he believed that it would be universal?

The project of G. W. Leibniz is that of a logical reconstruction of language. The very plurality of human tongues and their many differences constitute the evidence that something has been lost and is missing: the one perfect language of the human understanding which can be identified with the »adamic« language, the one all human beings spoke when they were one, before the disaster of Babel. The question is then: can we retrieve that language and how?

Leibniz's answer is that »yes, we can«, and that the way of overcoming the curse of Babel is by designing the right system of signs (or *characters*) which will constitute the pure and universal language of our understanding when it is not obfuscated by the equivocations, imprecisions, irregularities, irrational usages, etc., that characterize all human idioms. Such a universal language of characters, the *lingua characteristica universalis* as he calls it in Latin, will then be a perfect representation of the pure language of the pure understanding. It will take the form of a system of symbols representing our conceptions, in other words the classes of things about which we are speaking; of symbols representing the operations by which we combine in different ways those conceptions; of symbols by which we state something about the combination of conceptions that we form.

Thus, for example, if we pose that x represents the class of human beings, y the class of irrational beings, we can write $x.y = 0$, stating symbolically that the class of beings that are both human and irrational is empty, in other words that humans that are not rational do not exist or better said: that humans are rational beings. We can see here that the symbol of multiplication (represented by the dot) stands for the operation of intersection between two classes of things or beings while the symbol of equality means an identity between two classes.

We see in this example that the *lingua characteristica* takes the form of algebra of symbols where the letters do not represent quan-

tities but conceptions, the symbol of multiplication is to be interpreted as the operation by which a conception qualifies another conception, and the symbol of equality translates identity. One consequence of the adoption of the symbolism of algebra is that one can translate a logical demonstration as the performance of the algebraic procedures called by the symbolism and the interpretation of the final result in ordinary language: reasoning then amounts to calculation. The *lingua characteristic universalis* is also a calculus of reasoning, reasoning as a calculus: what Leibniz calls in Latin a *calculus ratiocinator.* Leibniz could then declare that he has used the language of symbolic, non quantitative algebra to express his *lingua characteristic*a. He has also tried other forms of symbolic representation. Aspects of his system can be found in some of the works he published but most of his writings on symbolic logic as a reconstruction of the philosophical grammar of all our languages have been discovered only posthumously when French philosopher Louis Couturat published most of them in the beginning of the twentieth century.[11]

The program of a »lingua characteristica universalis« and of a »calculus ratiocinator« has been after Leibniz the task of George Boole and Gottlob Frege. Thus, for example, Boole makes a clear reference to the ideal of retrieving the pure »adamic« language« implicit in all human idioms when he writes:

»We could (not) easily conceive that the unnumbered tongues and dialects of the earth should have preserved through the long succession of ages so much that is common and universal, were we not assured of the existence of some deep foundation of their agreement in the laws of the mind itself.«[12]

The analogy could be made between that idea of going deep down to the laws of the mind and reconstruct philosophically the language in which all is already translated and Walter Benjamin's notion of a ›pure language‹ that the translator experiences when accomplishing her task and which is the messianic destination of all our human languages:[13] in a different way, logicians following Leibniz were also seeking the language of all languages, the language of our agreement that would turn *disputatio* into *calculemus.*

[11] Couturat, *La logique de Leibniz d'après des documents inédits.*
[12] Boole, *An Investigation of the Laws of Thought on which are founded the Mathematical Theories of Logic and Probabilities.*
[13] Benjamin, »The task of the translator«.

4. ›Philosophizing in Tongues‹: Nietzsche's Philosophy of Grammar

Philosophizing in tongues (Cassin) means establishing oneself comfortably in our post Babelian condition; it is not the research for the *philosophical grammar* of our language but finds its starting point in the inescapable reality of the *grammatical philosophies* or *philosophies of grammar* present in our empirical languages, a concept coined by Nietzsche in the famous article 20 from *Beyond Good and Evil:*

»[…] philosophizing is so far an atavism of the highest order. The wonderful family resemblance of all Indian, Greek, and German philosophizing is easily enough explained. In fact where there is affinity of language, owing to the common *philosophy of grammar* (my emphasis), I mean owing to the unconscious domination and guidance of similar grammatical functions – it cannot but be that everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development and succession of philosophical systems, just as the way seems barred against certain other possibilities of world-interpretations. It is highly probable that philosophers within the domain of the Ural-Altaic languages (where the conception of the subject is least developed) look otherwise ›into the world‹ and will be found on paths of thought different from those of the Indo-Germans and Mussulmans, the spell of certain grammatical functions is ultimately the spell of physiological valuations and racial conditions – so much by way of rejecting Locke's superficiality with regard to the origin of ideas.«[14]

Nietzsche insists often in his work that philosophy is first and foremost *philology*. Philosophers must have in mind the simple fact that they speak a language and that before they are concepts, their words are precisely just that: words. Socrates is considered some sort of founding ancestor who drew a sharp demarcation between philosophy and its absolute »other«, which is the art of the sophists. Therefore, following Socrates, the view has been adopted that while the philosopher pursues the ideas, the sophist is just content with words, playing with them, using them for pure reasons of expediency without any regard for the Truth, or the Just, etc.

Nietzsche's anti-Platonism can be seen as the affirmation that the sophists are to be considered seriously, as a form of return to what

[14] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §20. Available, in a translation by Helen Zimmerm, at www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm.

made them »masters of wisdom« in the first place, which is the meaning of their name. Let us take the sophist Callicles, disciple of Gorgias whom we know through the heated dialogue he had with Socrates in Plato's *Gorgias*. We recall that generally speaking and to summarize his exchange with Plato's master in a word, he was very impatient with Socrates' dialectical method, his praise of temperance and affirmed boldly and stubbornly that he only had contempt for conventional morality: in the name of the justice that he considered »natural«, he held the view that the strong should indeed rule over the weak and that »democratic values«, the values of the many, were invented to place an artificial limitation to the will of the powerful.

The most important point is not the comparison that has been sometimes made between Callicles' views and what Nietzsche declares about the morality of the slaves to be opposed to the free creativity of the »masters«. The point is to try to find behind the presentation made of the sophist by Plato the true nature of the teaching of the »master of wisdoms« represented by Callicles. That teaching as translated by Nietzsche is that the philosopher and not the sophist may very well be the one who is content with words: the one who believes in substances behind actions because his grammar leads him to consider that there must be a subject, an »I«, behind the operation (verb) of thinking (Descartes) or that there is a ›causa sui‹. When we make our philosophical statements a propos substances-subjects, we are reminded by Nietzsche-the- philologist that we are thus expressing a »faith in [the] grammar« of the language we speak.[15]

Let me say here that the project initiated by Barbara Cassin around the notion that »translation« is »a paradigm« for the social sciences and the humanities, to which I participate, is in many respects in the continuity of the »sophistical practices« understood as the practices stemming from the premise that philosophy must be first philology. That a genuine philosophical examination of our assumptions means being fully conscious that we speak a particular language which is one among many, and that in it is at work the philosophy implied by its grammar. In other words we have to be aware that »grammar is the conceptual matrix of metaphysics« as

[15] Nietzsche writes: »I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar« at the end of paragraph 5 of the chapter »Reason in Philosophy« from *The Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, available online at www.inp.uw.edu.pl/mdsie/.../twilight-of-the-idols-friedrich-nietzsche.pdf.

French philosopher Frederique Ildefonse has written.[16] This is why we cannot just make a leap beyond the plurality of our different languages with their different grammars and reach some realm of universal thought in a universal philosophical grammar: we are always »philosophizing in tongues« *(philosopher en langues)*.

5. Conclusion: The Universal as Translation

While Leibniz's philosophical grammar in all languages meant faith in the universal, Nietzsche's notion of a philosophy of grammar insists on the fact that our idioms incline us to think in different directions. Does that mean that when we find our starting point in the plurality of human languages we have to renounce any notion of universality?

Let me examine French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas' *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (*Humanism of the Other*, 1972)[17], in particular the pages under the headline »Before Culture« from the chapter of the book on »Signification and Sense«. In those pages, Lévinas extolls elevation and verticality as what »ordains being« and as the only mode of existence of universality. Only from the elevated perspective of a »signification« that »could be detached from cultures« and situated above them, is a judgment on those cultures possible.[18] And if one asks about the reality of such a perspective outside of any particular cultural perspective, the answer, Lévinas says, is: »Western Civilization«; yes, he stresses: »the decried Western civilization […]« Before I complete the citation, let me ask in a parenthesis: »decried by whom«? Obviously Lévinas is speaking of those who, in his words, manifest a »radical opposition against cultural expansion by colonization«. And those would be first and foremost the former colonial subjects themselves. But what do they in fact decry? Not »Western civilization« as such, certainly. Rather the face the »West« presented to the people it colonized which was not that of civility and civilization. That face is what Mahatma Gandhi was aiming at when he famously answered, when asked what he thought of Western civilization: »that would be a good idea.« I close the parenthesis and I

[16] Ildefonse, *La naissance de la grammaire dans l'Antiquité grecque.*
[17] Lévinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme.*
[18] Lévinas, op. cit. p. 37.

complete the citation of Lévinas: »the decried Western civilization that knew how to understand cultures that never understood anything about themselves«.[19]

The assumption is that there is a »Western civilization« which is not a culture among cultures, a language among languages but the Logos itself: Europe simply cannot be a province of the world. It is naturally endowed with an anthropological vocation (to understand particular cultures that never understood themselves), because it has had the »generosity of liberating the truth from […] cultural presuppositions«, »purifying thought of cultural alluviums and *language particularisms*« (p. 37, my emphasis). That is why in fact it could renounce the very violence of colonialism because »culture and colonization do not [necessarily] go together«.[20]

Now, ours is precisely a time of decolonization: as Lévinas writes, it is characterized by »the radical opposition against cultural expansion by colonization«.[21] And if that comes to mean that even western cultural expansion has no legitimacy any more, the result of considering that »all cultural personalities realize the Spirit [instead of Mind] by the same rights« *(realisent au même titre l'esprit)* the result is a loss of »orientation«. Playing on the words »occident« and »orient«, Emmanuel Lévinas writes: »The world created by this saraband of countless equivalent cultures, each one justifying itself in its own context, is certainly dis-Occidentalized, it is also disoriented.«[22] In a word, this is, in the language of Edouard Glissant, a *chaos-monde*, a »chaos-world«.

Lévinas certainly could adopt that expression here and speak of a »chaos-world«. Except of course that it would not have the positive meaning that Glissant envisions. As we know, the core of Lévinas' philosophy, his ethics more precisely, is that the moral »ought« has its source in the fact that I encounter the naked and vulnerable face of the other person as an absolute transcendence beyond my self-centeredness, and that from that transcendence it commands me »not to kill«, to serve and to protect his or her life. To say that the other comes to me as a naked face is to say that she does not visit (in the religious sense of a visitation) against the background of her culture

[19] ibid.
[20] ibid.
[21] ibid.
[22] ibid.

or with it. By definition, the dyadic I-Thou ethical relationship excludes all appurtenances. So the absolute respect for the transcendence that the other person is as a naked face, does not translate itself as a command for respect for other cultures or the other's culture. In a manner that is comparable to the way in which the Immanuel Kant of the Ethics is certainly not the one who shows disdain for the humanity he describes in his anthropology or geography of cultures, Emmanuel Lévinas combines the crucial notion of ethics as hospitality for the Other with the strong conviction that of course no »other cultural personality realizes the Spirit by the same rights« as the West which is unique and exceptional in its realization of the *translatio studii* from Jerusalem to Athens to Rome.[23] It is the same conviction that Husserl expressed in his Vienna conference of 1935 on »Philosophy and the Crisis of the European Man« when he declared that while the rest of the world should understand that it had to Europeanize itself as best as it could, a Europe fully aware of its philosophic *telos* could not find the slightest reason to indianize itself in any respect. The language of phenomenology, Husserl's and Lévinas' is certainly not that of multiculturalism.

Loss of orientation is loss of universality because if signification is tied to language and we are confronted with the plurality of languages in a decolonized or postcolonial world, the verticality and elevation of the universal is simply impossible as the only dimension we are left with is that of laterality or of horizontality where relations between cultures and languages are inscribed. Such a situation will mean »no direct or privileged contact with the world of ideas«, no access to a »universal grammar«, but instead going »from one culture [to] penetrate another, as one goes from one's mother tongue to learn another language.«[24] And Lévinas evokes another phenomenologist, another disciple of Husserl, namely Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as the philosopher who spoke of a »lateral universality« which is for him, of course, a contradiction in terms.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty has declared that in our times when no given culture or language can pretend any more to be the incarnation of the Logos, there is no »overarching universality«.[25]

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[23] »The Afro-Asiatic masses are strangers to the Sacred history that forms the heart of the Judaic-Chistian world« he declared in *Difficult Freedom*, p. 160.

[24] Lévinas, op. cit., p. 37.

[25] Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, p. 119.

I do not advocate a world of fragments and insularities, of the untranslatable, but what Immanuel Wallerstein has called for, after »the era of European universalism«: a truly universal universalism and a language for »universalizing our particulars and particularizing our universals« in an open-ended process that would »allow us to find new syntheses.«[26] I believe that such a truly universal universalism echoes Merleau-Ponty's »lateral universal« and that it is synonymous with translation. Without the mediation of a universal grammar as Lévinas said the possibility of a universal and horizontal circulation of enunciations is translation.

Here is what Merleau-Ponty says about our postcolonial time:

»the equipment of our social being can be dismantled and reconstructed by the voyage, as we are able to learn to speak other languages. This provides *a second way to the universal:* no longer the *overarching universal* of a strictly objective method, but a sort of *lateral universal* which we acquire through ethnological experience and its incessant testing of the self through the other person and the other person through the self. It is question of constructing a general system of reference in which the point of view of the native, the point of view of the civilized man, and the mistaken views each has of the other can all find a place – that is of constituting a more comprehensive experience which becomes in principle accessible to men of a different time and country«.[27]

First remark: the point made by Lévinas (in a dismissive way) that this is like learning another language from one's mother tongue is precisely what is stated here in a positive way. The call is made for the capacity to be in between languages, to be a translator, and that capacity is the lesson to be drawn from ethnology: it is important to note that the quote comes from the text devoted by Merleau-Ponty to the reflection on ethnology and it is entitled »From Mauss to Claude Levi-Strauss«.[28]

It is important, and this is my second remark, that the lateral universal as translation does not mean transparency and the elimination of the untranslatable. On the contrary the untranslatable or the unavoidable misunderstandings or »mistaken views about each

[26] Wallerstein, *European Universalism: the Rhetoric of Power*. Interestingly I. Wallerstein ends on Senghor's »rendezvous of give and take«.
[27] Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 119–120.
[28] In: Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, loc. cit.

other« are part of this incessant testing, marked by the co-presence of many different views. So lateral universality does not have as its horizon the establishment of a universal grammar, nor the end game of a final reduction of the diversity of the ›chaos-world‹ to the One and the Same. What does it mean to »learn to speak other languages«, thus heeding the injunction from anthropology?

The task now is, in a decolonized world, where the formerly colonized try to get rid of mental patterns and normative prescriptions of thought, to explore what he called a »lateral universal«, which I interpret as a universal of translation. The lesson drawn by Merleau-Ponty from anthropology, (and he indicates that Husserl himself at one point understood the necessity to pay attention to other languages and life forms), is that we have to learn how to think, not beyond the plurality of languages (by pretending for example that my particular language is that of the universal) but from language to language or between languages. And here the necessity of translations comes in.

Let us then imagine a pedagogical utopia. We know that the pediment of Plato's Academy said ›let no one ignorant of geometry enter here‹. The new Academy of the twenty first century global world may ask: »Let no one ignorant of a radically other tongue than her own enter here«. Utopia? Really? That is the situation of African philosophers.

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