

## LANGUAGES ARE SCIENTIFIC WORKPLACES AND NOT SIMPLY VEHICLES FOR SCIENTIFIC IDEAS

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Considering the current form of globalization in scientific activities, it is high time to break with the illusion of a single language of reference and to question its *de facto* consequence : the formation of an international vehicular device characterized by a minimized level of reflexivity. Indeed, just like the various forms of Neo Latin in the early modern times, and some drastically simplified variants of written Chinese in some possible future, the variations of technical English since the Second World War, have produced a strict vehicle facilitating the circulation of words, topics and trends. But the formation of concepts – their critical and experimental elaboration – proceeds from tensions between scientific formulations and folk knowledges, between abstract international thinking and embodied singular linguistic competencies and practices. Here is the very location of everyone's intimate questioning, especially in the social sciences : the dissatisfaction induced by the abstraction of the language of science and the concrete, practical and intimate confrontation with phenomena and with their earlier conceptions<sup>1</sup>.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century and later on, French scientific language proceeded from an acknowledged near monopoly of the royal Academy of sciences, and then was run through a pyramidal structure of the institutions of state education created by the Revolution. Here, a peculiar social form proved likely to favor the production of a language proper for science, that of a learned society for general knowledge, where established abilities were supposed to be combined, and whose work crystallized in the form of a regular publication, recording the state of the relations between them : a space both concrete and institutional where the synthesis work is in principle achieved.

Let us make a rapid comparison with other languages, for instance English or German, over a relatively long period. Immediately, new data proper to the history

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1. This presentation brings back elements we have argued at the occasion of the opening of the 6<sup>th</sup> series, see "Travail de synthèse et diversité des langues/*Synthesis work and diversity of languages*", *Revue de synthèse*, n° 1-2, 2007, p. 5-18.

of universities and learned societies lead us to think about each language area concerned. For a long time, the scientific and philosophical English language was created within the internal tensions of the duopoly of Oxford and Cambridge. To continue with such an indication until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it would be necessary to analyze how, despite an apparently common international language, linguistic tensions can be found in the depths of the English language, whether it is subject to the current use in the universities of the American continent, or whether to the one peculiar to the British institutions. In Germany and Austria, for several centuries, it was a multipolar scholarly world, consisting of regional universities, with, between them, an open circulation of books and people. It has produced – particularly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the social standards proper to the creation of the German language used by scientists and philosophers.

In light of these insights, we can better gauge the opportunity and the difficulties that have arisen for the *Revue de synthèse* since it became involved with a global publishing partner – a demanding partner with regards to quality but a partner able to offer an international distribution of the journal. The series that was created on this occasion in 2007, the sixth since 1900, was immediately integrated within a distribution system which, for the first time in its history, gave to the *Revue de synthèse* the potential response to which it had aspired since at least the 1930's, when Henri Berr, its founder, specified that it was devoted to the promotion of “international scientific co-ordination”.

Is it however sufficient to aim at an international dialogue formula and to have practical means of distribution in order to extend the scope of the *Revue*? Its action proceeds from particular conditions – from a scientific style, a “French touch”, may be. And an international working language for social sciences is not so easily built... or to put it differently, such a language would have been in use for a long time because of the great need for it felt by scholars not only in principle, but also, mostly because they meet quite regularly – and have done so, let us say since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the railway has made international travels easier. We have to keep in mind the intellectual genealogies from which our work proceeds, the possibilities of their former intersections with others that we can spot today in the writings of our contemporaries in different languages, and to brush aside the anachronous illusion of earlier dialogues, which is caused today by the proximity of the books on the library shelves and by the present-day reality of a scientific milieu, which is global in a new and different manner.

With the utmost possible care, our task should consist in attempting to gain a very good grasp of these genealogies, to aim at defining interactions which have occurred between them, and to distinguish the accuracy of the language from useless pretentiousness. In the course of the publication of this 6<sup>th</sup> series, using French experience as its base, initiating new relationships with counterparts, our purpose is to construct a trans-linguistic laboratory derived from the plurality of languages. This laboratory which could provide research in social sciences, in history and in philosophy with a sort of common language, favorable to the reasoned intellectual work, and likely to determine the grounds whereon the different disciplines concerned can meet, within each intellectual tradition and each language. In passing, the possibility for new approaches will be indicated, an attempt will be made to enrich the dialogues engaged in... and there will be no hesitation in ruining the counterfeiting trade, which is unmistakably made easier