

One Language, One World: The Common Measure of Education

Paul Standish

Institute of Education, London

[E]ven posing the issue of cultural diversity, and of the sense that cultural diversity is in tension with the Enlightenment, in terms of “religions” (perhaps the concept of “religions” is itself a uniquely Western concept) and “history” (a notion that has come to have a special sense in the West in the last two or three centuries) is itself unduly parochial. Perhaps we in the West have far too narrow a sense of the wealth of human cultural diversity, and perhaps this makes it easier for some of us to contemplate the idea of a world with one language, one literature, one music, one art, one politics — in a word, one culture.¹

In the essay from which the above words are drawn, Hilary Putnam addresses the question “whether ethics should be universalistic or should rather be rooted in the forms of life of particular traditions and cultures” in the light of two influential streams of thought.² On the one hand, he turns to the political philosophy of John Rawls, recognizing him as, at the time, the greatest living social ethicist. How far that philosophy is properly described as universalistic is clarified through acknowledgment of Rawls’ own claim that he was not discussing the “foundations” of ethics but rather addressing the problem confronting Western bourgeois democracies since the French Revolution: the tension between equality and liberty. Putnam mentions Rawls’ increasing pessimism about “universalistic” ethical theory. On the other hand, he refers to George Steiner’s suggestion that after the Holocaust³ it may be impossible to believe that the values of the West have any vitality at all.⁴ Putting the thoughts of Rawls and Steiner together in this respect, Putnam finds himself in a “bind”:

If Rawls is right, ethical theory seems to require the framework of a tradition to give its questions substance, and to provide a shared framework of assumptions within which questions can be discussed. Yet the horrors to which the regnant Western tradition have led call into question, at least for some, the possibility of doing what Rawls suggests, that is, just assuming the basic values of the Enlightenment and calmly discussing how to adjudicate tensions between them.⁵

Putnam makes clear that he has no intention of abandoning such Enlightenment values as liberty, equality, and fraternity, but he is skeptical of the familiar response — that it is not the values that are at fault but simply our compliance with them. The latter point is brought home in view of the lack of clarity about what these values amount to or how they are interpreted — as, for example, in the tensions between different notions of freedom and equality. Hence, the distinction between what our values are and our compliance with them is plainly too simple. But he emphasizes also that we should not turn our eyes away from the dissatisfaction with Enlightenment values felt by many people. He proceeds to weigh the purported turn in the work of Bernard Williams towards a “relativity of distance”⁶ against the moral possibilities and commitments of pragmatism, concluding by quoting William James: “No one has insight into all the ideals. No one should presume to judge them off-hand. The pretension to dogmatize about them in each other is the root of most human injustices and cruelties, and the trait in human character most likely to make the angels weep.”⁷

I do not purpose to address in the round the massive questions Putnam raises but rather to home in on one small aspect of the paper, upon which, I believe, so much else depends. The idea of one language, one culture, in the opening quotation leads Putnam to a recollection. While not wishing to say that most Enlightenment thinkers would endorse such an idea, he acknowledges that some have done so. Rudolph Carnap, whose stature as a thinker and as a human being Putnam does not doubt, felt strongly that “for all x , planned x is better than unplanned x ”:

Thus the idea of a socialist world in which everyone spoke Esperanto (except scientists, who, for their technical work, would employ notations from symbolic logic) was one which would have delighted him. And I recently had a conversation with a student who remarked quite casually that it would not be a bad idea if there were only one language and one literature: “We would get used to it, and it might help to prevent war.”⁸

I consider what, in the idea of one language, one culture, one education, might give the angels cause to weep. I do this by way of a historical, anecdotal digression, but I hope to show why this is warranted. The thought that there might be one language, whether an original language or one to come, leads into questions about the nature of meaning, in the light of which ideas of human being and, a fortiori, education cannot remain unaffected.

LANGUAGE AS VEHICLE, LANGUAGE AS NAME

In 1926 Gershom Scholem wrote a letter to Franz Rosenzweig to mark the latter’s fortieth birthday. Rosenzweig was by that time crippled with disease, and unable to speak. Scholem, deeply committed to the Zionism of the time, and to the revival of Hebrew as a living language that was part of that project, had left Berlin three years earlier in order to live in Palestine. But his letter, entitled “Confession on the Subject of Our Language” (*Bekennntnis über unsere Sprache*), is a passionate lament, resounding with disillusionment, over the way that revival was being attempted, specifically over the ways that a sacred language was being reduced to a “vehicular language,” a language of communication, and thus becoming secular. It is the threat that this constituted that is the letter’s burden.

Two factors amplify the tensions surrounding the letter. In the first place, Rosenzweig regarded Zionism as itself a secularization of Messianism and hence as betrayal of the need to reform German Jewry from within. Scholem was more than aware of this view, for conflict over the issue had, in the years shortly before, been the cause of a complete break between the two men. In the second place, while Scholem believed that Rosenzweig was “on the mend,” his condition was in fact degenerative and terminal. Scholem later remarked: “I would never have broached this delicate topic, which stirred such emotions in us both, if I had known that Rosenzweig was then already in the first stages of his fatal disease, a lateral sclerosis.”⁹

Scholem identifies himself and Rosenzweig as members of a generation of transition, and the responsibility to “our children” resonates throughout the letter. In the Messianism of their mutual faith, this responsibility cannot be understood without reference to imperatives of transformation. The tone of the letter is prophetic, its eschatological force accentuated by the “we.” To what exactly does it attest?

Language has degenerated into a Volapük, a supposedly all-purpose, maximally efficient means of communication, in which any significance of proper names is effaced. The people are blind to what is happening, insensitive to the leveling emptiness of their words. Those who are adept in the resuscitated language — “spellbound,” “demonic,” “sorcerers” — are poised above “an abyss” (the word used five times in two pages). The conscientious of the present generation, who live in knowledge of the sacred language, shudder when, in the banal exchanges of this new “thoughtless conversation,” “a word from the religious sphere terrifies us, just here where it was intended to comfort.”¹⁰ Children exposed to this newly secularized language will grow up ignorant of the sacred language that lies beneath it. They will be tranquilized by this new “expressionless linguistic world,” where language’s originary force is stemmed.

But what exactly is the abyss? Let us allow that this is, *first*, the archetypal image of danger and judgment, but associated with this there is also, *second*, a bottomlessness or absence of foundations, as well as, *third*, the darkness of the unknown. Crucial to the sense of this is an understanding of language that is at odds with prevailing theorizations, and it is here that the slurs against this new “Esperanto” take a deeper turn. For, as Scholem insists, “Language is Name [*Sprache ist Namen*]. In the names the power of language is enclosed; in them its abyss is sealed.” The present generation lives progressively in denial of this, but ultimately the force of the sacred will not be withheld, for the names have their own life without which “our children...would be hopelessly abandoned to the void.”¹¹

BETWEEN TWO PLACES

My discussion is based on Jacques Derrida’s thought-provoking commentary on the letter in his enigmatically-titled essay “The Eyes of Language,” to which the text of the letter is attached as an appendix.¹² Derrida’s reading generalizes implications of the letter, in ways that extend beyond this historical moment to questions of language and tradition, and of relations between generations. He is concerned less with any special status of Hebrew than with the relations between the sacred and the profane within language more generally. Let us attend first, then, to his evocation of anxieties about profanation that Scholem expresses:

This linguistic evil does not let itself be localized or circumscribed. It does not only affect one means of communication precisely because it degrades into a means of communication a language originarily or essentially destined for something entirely distinct from information. One transforms a language and, first of all, names, into an informative medium.... The evil stems from the fact that Zionists — those who believe themselves Zionists and who are, in fact, no more than holding this power, nothing other than falsifiers of Zionism — do not understand the essence of language. They treat this abyssal mystery as a problem — worse, as a local, specific, circumscribed, technolinguistic or technopolitical problem. This is why they are asleep and why one day they will wake up on the verge, even in the midst, of the catastrophe, at the moment when the sacred language will return, as punishment and return/ghostliness (*revenge*). (“The Eyes,” 194–95)

The blindness to which those who use this degraded language succumb is not an incapacity of its sorcerers alone: “The blind men that we are, almost all of us, live in this language, above an abyss.”¹³

Derrida refers to the letter as a “correspondence without correspondence,” acknowledging the rift between Scholem and Rosenzweig (“The Eyes,” 194): an experience of difference thus conditions not only the “confession” but the reading itself. And this is multiplied later, as we shall see, in Derrida’s difference from Scholem over the central problematic.

Derrida characterizes Scholem’s position as follows: “As sacred, Hebrew was both a dead language — as a language one did not or should not speak in daily life — and a language more living than what is generally called a living language.” But in its revived form it has turned into a “a non-language, the frozen grin of a semiotics or disincarnated fleshless [*décharnée*] and formally universal exchange value, an instrument in the commerce of signs, without a proper place, without a proper name, a false return to life, a shoddy resurrection” (“The Eyes,” 209–10). It is “a language that one pretends to resuscitate by giving it this masked body, this gesticulation of an Esperantist masquerade, this puppet of a technological and cadaveric instrumentality” (“The Eyes,” 210). Thus, the people who speak it are doubly responsible: first, because they are, as one always is, dominated by language — yet do not acknowledge, perhaps are incapable of acknowledging, that this is so; and second, because they are not aware of their responsibility towards the legacy of language and have not asked questions about it. But, Scholem warns, this false cadaver will animate itself, unleashing itself on the demonic sorcerers, who are themselves spellbound. To say this is already to do two things. First, it is to take language as speech, and as speech in the name of someone who is not a subject but a creator and origin — for Scholem, in the name of God. Second, it is to take language as basically nonconceptual (at least to the extent that concepts are thought of in terms of a formalizable, instrumentalizable, technologized generality of meaning): it is indissociable from proper names. Hence, Scholem excludes any possibility of a contamination from the start.

Derrida writes with wry understatement: “This interpretation of language and of technology obviously should be, in my view, problematized — at least” (“The Eyes,” 211). To the extent that originary and technological language are dissociated, and that the outside to the origin is regarded as contaminating, this aligns with a certain, Christian interiorization of the spiritual, with speech the best articulation of interiority and writing a degenerate, material form. This is at once to evoke the ancient suspicion of writing¹⁴ and to identify writing as a technology, continuous with degeneration into mere communication, circulation, and exchange. This can be associated, Derrida suggests, with suspicions of semiotics harbored by Walter Benjamin, Scholem’s friend, with its “bourgeois,” traditional oppositions of “sensible/intelligible, form/meaning, content/form, signified/signifier, whether understood in their platonic tradition or in their modernization” (“The Eyes,” 223). Blindness to the sacred language sustains these oppositions, upon which not just semiotics but philosophy itself, in some of its familiar aspects, has been based. This is blindness to the fact that language is not just a grammar or a system of communication and reference but, beyond these, a naming. Names are not substantives, cashable in sets of predicates, and hence not, contrary to Gottlieb Frege,

Bertrand Russell, and John Stuart Mill before them, “disguised, definite descriptions”; they are not to be accounted for in Carnap’s “anti-metaphysical” logical empiricism; and they are not fundamentally signifiers correlating with signifieds: they are a calling, a summons, an invocation. This is seen most clearly in proper names. And it is telling that the proper name is untranslatable: Michel is not Michael, London not Londra.

In this naming, there is — and let this scandalous thought be acknowledged — a kind of haunting of our language. Haunting is surely evident in that the words we use, the very terms of our thought, are, as Derrida has extensively shown, available to us only from origins we cannot know, with connotations we cannot fully fathom; and in using them we become hostage to future interpretations, relocations, and re-associations of our words that extend beyond our control. Words are not just tools, fully present to us for our use: they depend in their essence on this nonpresence. Better put, the spectral aspect of our words — and hence of our thought and being — defies any oppositional logic of presence and absence. Indeed, some sense of this is evident in Scholem’s double reference to the ghostly (*gespenstisch*) character of the language, ultimately its haunting by the name of God. Secularizing the language, we are “playing with the ghosts” (“The Eyes,” 214).

But there is a paradox in the letter. On the one hand, it is impossible for the words of a sacred language to be emptied of their original meaning, with which they overflow, and hence *secularization is impossible*; in the end it is only a “*façon de parler*,” a circulation of ready-made phrases. And yet, on the other hand, *secularization does take place*. Stéphane Mosès’ commentary — which touches on our propensity to be scandalized by these thoughts — gives this a psychoanalytic reading, taking the “impossibility” of secularization as representative of repression and return: the ghost is the *revenant*. This is to identify those who live within the terms of this secularization as suffering from a “collective neurosis” (as qtd in “The Eyes,” 225). Scholem’s confession at once laments what has happened and warns that a price will be paid. We stand above an abyss, and the abyss hides a volcano. Language, full to bursting, is a volcano, and eventually it must erupt. The fire inside the volcano represents an original purity, authority of the name, source of justice; outside the volcano there is only technological contamination, the instrumental circulation of signs. Secularized language, with its planning, systematization, and codification in rules, offers us mastery and an ordering of the world, but we must attend to what defies this.

It is, however, here most clearly that Derrida’s thought moves away from Scholem to enable us to see how *the gap between the sacred and the non-sacred* can produce “an experience of the edge, the edge of the abyss, between two places” that is precisely the space of responsibility and judgment (“The Eyes,” 217).

Earlier in the text Derrida has raised the question — from a position, he claims, of “incompetence” — of how the words *Verweltlichung* (laicization, secularization) or, in its Latinate version, *Säkularisierung*, could themselves be translated into the sacred Hebrew, and hence how the opposition upon which Scholem’s account

depends could be realized in its terms. (A certain linguistic distaste is reflected in the scare-quotes Scholem gives to *Säkularisierung*. He is already, it would seem, struggling with the word *Verweltlichung* because of its associations of with the *haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with its controversial universalist orientation.¹⁵) This opens to a broader point, as Derrida shows: what, if there is one, is the “Jewish equivalent for the spiritual/worldly, sacred/secular opposition, etc.?” Can one have the thoughts that Scholem expresses in the letter if one has only the original Hebrew? Can one have these thoughts, this experience of the abyss, without the movement between languages that translation affords? One need only gesture to the connections and disconnections between “spirit,” *Geist*, and *esprit* for the implications to multiply, in ways to which the troubled translation of *revenance* already testifies. Moreover, Derrida’s hopeful thought at the end is to wonder how far Mosès’ reading of this letter can open onto a new possibility of subjectivity, a new relation to the sign, characterized by an experience of paradox. Paradox arises from the combination of, first, the insight into language realized in Scholem’s letter, modified by Derrida’s reading as indicated above, and, second, Mosès’ thematization of the instrumentalization of language and his psychoanalytic identification of repression, themselves products of a certain modern rationalism, and hence outside the sacred language. Derrida ponders the thought that the force of such an experience of paradox might enable “a deconstruction of the philosophical oppositions that govern a semiotism inherited from both Platonism and the Enlightenment” (“The Eyes,” 224–25).

Might not the deconstruction of this semiotism realize those values of the Enlightenment with which Putnam is concerned in ways that can meet the problems he raises?

THE EXPERIENCE OF TRANSLATION

My discussion has so far only touched on questions of translation.¹⁶ What can be said of the forms of *experience* that translation identifies or realizes in Derrida’s text? In Scholem’s letter this is apparent from the start: his question is about the fate of Hebrew when it undergoes a kind of translation — its deliberate revival and more or less artificial conversion to secular, vehicular use. What is at stake here is in a sense not “his” language, for Scholem writes to Rosenzweig in the German they share. Yet in his almost visceral discomfort, he resorts to scare-quotes and French: what is to be said exceeds the language in which he finds himself. A foreign expression in a text can create particular problems for the translator as the sense of the outside that is thereby achieved cannot simply be replicated, particularly where the foreign expression is in the translator’s target language. Added to these problems is the fact that the first publication of Derrida’s text is not in French but in English, in Gil Anidjar’s translation. Hence the published essay as a whole is interrupted both by Derrida’s inserted comments into quotations from Scholem and Mosès, and Anidjar’s editorial additions of the original German or French expressions that were used. The function of these additions is typically to reveal a gap between the sense of the original term and the one the translator has chosen, perhaps *faute de mieux*, and this is a gap that typically cannot be closed. This occasions for the reader an

experience of the abyss that lies beneath our habitual use of language, an experience that makes all the more vivid the way that the name arises, less as pure reference and partly as invocation.

Translation foregrounded in this way exposes something of the space of responsibility and judgment, while ideological position taking is commonly shored up by monolingualisms of various kinds. Can English, as a world language, make the world monolingual? It is with some thoughts about its potential to realize one culture, one education, that I shall conclude.

MONOLINGUALISM AND THE MEASURE OF EDUCATION

This essay began with the broad and chilling sweep of Putnam's question about the Enlightenment and the Holocaust, raising the philosophical stakes of pragmatism and relativism; and it narrowed and accentuated the attention on language through scrutiny of Scholem's letter, heavy with expectations of Israel. I realize the risk of bathos as I now move from the weight of such matters to the stuff of ordinary, fairly privileged lives. But in a sense this is a risk I have wanted to court. For while it would be callous to make connections too easily here, if we take the converse view, that it is wrong to make them at all, we compound our bourgeois, voyeuristic detachment in our own forms of blindness to the abyss: we immunize ourselves from the responsibility to language that translation so powerfully demonstrates. So let me narrow the focus and blatantly domesticate it, and this in two ways.

If one imagines, first, philosophy of education meetings around the world, at which thoughts such as Putnam's might be entertained—say, (1) in the joint meeting of the Korean and Japanese Societies, (2) the Philosophy Network of the European Educational Research Association, and (3) the annual gathering of the Philosophy of Education Society—it is a striking fact that in each case English is the *lingua franca*. Of course, this seems clear evidence once again of the growing hegemony of English in the world, but the situation is more complex than this. There are good reasons for the use of English in these contexts, and the reasons are not uniform. In the first case English is adopted as a convenience by people who come from countries where their own language is mostly unchallenged. The second case is somewhat different because of the inclusion of quite large numbers of native speakers of English alongside a majority who speak English as a foreign language, most of whom come from countries where their own language is dominant. In the third, the dominant home language is spoken, and those American and Canadian participants whose first language is not English will most likely have grown up in circumstances where their own language is subordinate. As is so often the case in matters of translation, there are gains and losses, and to see this we need to revert, however jarring this may seem, to the terms of the above discussion. The obvious problems of colonization must be considered alongside the threat of vehicularization. If the *experience* of difference is of value in the realization of the abyssal nature of language, it may be that those who find themselves speaking languages other than their own are in some ways in a heightened position: they are caused to think between languages. But where the outcome is a compromise over meaning, a good-enough-

to-get-you-there vehicularization, the abyssal nature of language and the enigma of naming are progressively obscured. If the world language is not in fact English but English-as-a-second-language, a crucial question needs to be asked: is such a language destined to be vehicular, or does its coming to common use occasion the experience of translation that is advocated here?

The problems under discussion extend far beyond academic conferences, and beyond matters so specifically linguistic. Thus, if one turns, second, to practices of education, the focus can be widened somewhat, still demonstrating how troubling questions of meaning reverberate through ordinary lives, in schools and universities. Pretensions of one language, one culture, are realized in education in such developments as international league-tables (PISA), standardized measures of performance (Bologna), and international research quality indicators (bibliometrics). What increasingly needs to be asked is how far such measures have turned into a cadaveric instrumentality, with shoddy resurrections of value and spellbound standards: the much-vaunted “objectivity” of exhaustive specifications of criteria covers over the space of responsibility, blocks the practice of judgment, on which culture and education ultimately depend. The double genitive in “the measure of education” invites the thought that there is a need to look less at how we measure education and more at how our education is a measure of ourselves. Can education, in its cultural, linguistic variety give us the measure of things — of our societies, of what we can become? Abyssal thought such as this articulates an appropriate correlate in education of the idea that secularization is impossible. If the originary force of language that must run through education is stemmed, is this not enough to make the angels weep?

1. Hillary Putnam, “Pragmatism and Relativism: Universal Values and Traditional Ways of Life,” in *Words and Life*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 182–97.

2. Putnam, “Pragmatism and Relativism,” 182.

3. This is given an extended meaning by Steiner to include not only the “execution” of six million Jewish women, men, and children, but the killing of seventy million people, by war, genocide, and so on, in the thirty-seven years beginning in 1914. Putnam chooses to write “‘execution’ to bring out the horrible ‘legality’ of the proceeding, as contrasted with a mere ‘slaughter.’” Ibid., 182.

4. Putnam says he is referring to a lecture given by Steiner a few years before at the Van Leer Foundation.

5. Putnam, “Pragmatism and Relativism,” 183.

6. Ibid., 191–92. Putnam refers in particular to Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

7. Putnam, “Pragmatism and Relativism,” 196. These lines are taken from William James, “What Makes a Life Significant?” in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Library, 2009).

8. Putnam, “Pragmatism and Relativism,” 185.

9. Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, Schocken Books, 1980), 140.

10. Gershom Scholem, “Confession on the Subject of Our Language” [*Bekennntnis über unsere Sprache*] (1926), quoted in Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language,” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. and trans. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 226–27.

11. Scholem, "Confessions," 227.
12. Jacques Derrida, "The Eyes of Language," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. and trans. Gil Anidjar (New York, Routledge, 2002). This work will be cited as "The Eyes" in the text for all subsequent references.
13. Scholem, "Confession," 197.
14. The *Phaedrus* is the *locus classicus* for this suspicion.
15. I am grateful to Monika Kaminska for drawing my attention to this.
16. There has been a resurgence of interest in translation recently in philosophy of education. See Lovisa Bergdahl, "Lost in Translation: On the Untranslatable and its Ethical Implications for Religious Pluralism," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 42, no. 4 (2008): 31–44; Naoko Saito, "Ourselves in Translation: Stanley Cavell and Philosophy as Autobiography," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 2 (2009): 253–67; Claudia Ruitenberg, "Distance and Defamiliarisation: Translation as Philosophical Method," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 3 (2009): 421–35; and Suzy Harris, "Translation, Internationalisation and the University," *London Review of Education* 7, no. 3 (2009): 223–33.