



Workshop

“Language and Foreignness: An Intercultural Perspective”

19 – 21 September 2022

Venue:

Neue Aula, room 236

Geschwister-Scholl-Platz, Tübingen

Organisation:

College of Fellows, University of Tübingen, Germany

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How can we define a foreign language? And how does learning a foreign language change the way in which we experience what we call our “own”? Language, according to Martin Heidegger, pervades our relation to the world to such an extent that, when we go through the forest, we go in fact through the word “forest”. Language as the mother tongue is the place of familiarity, of what is always already understood and which literally *goes without saying* – it is a place of belonging. What changes, then, when we make a step out of this familiarity and go through other words and other silences between words – through other systems of differentiations, as Ferdinand de Saussure would say?

But what exactly do “other words” mean if, according to linguists like Joseph Vendryès, one cannot draw borders between languages as fixed entities, nor can one say, in a historical approach, where one language ends and another begins? The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty states, as a consequence, that there is only one language (*langage*), although not as a transcendental structure, but as a concrete universal. Yet, despite the uniqueness of the language event as such, we do *experience* different types of expression within our mother tongue, we also experience other languages as different and separated of our own, while language politics draws its own thresholds between idioms, as philosophers like Bernhard Waldenfels underline. On what level should we then address the question of the foreignness *of languages* and the question of the foreignness *at work within one language*? Is the intra-linguistic gap between daily speech and literary or philosophical discourse different from the gap that we are confronted with when we learn a foreign language, when we live in it, or when a foreigner that comes to our land speaks an idiom that we don’t understand?

Since language is at the same time the mark of intersubjectivity and the expression of the cohesion of a community, we also need to reflect upon the encounter of languages on a social, affective and cultural level. Language is related to other types of *institutions*, in the sense Merleau-Ponty gives to this term, like national identity or religion. What kind of an “in between” does the linguistic encounter open and how does it influence the way in which a community reflects upon itself? What answer can sociology or the study of religions bring to these questions?

Our thinking tradition influences, in its turn, the way in which we perceive language and the way in which we relate to the foreignness of another culture. We should therefore not only address the question of language on a theoretical level, but we should also displace the interrogation towards other traditions of thought and towards concrete, historical moments of occurrence of a linguistic “in-between”, which do not belong to the European framework. How do other cultures experience language and the foreignness related to it? Is the phenomenon of the “foreign”, as such, translatable or does it take a different shape in a different historical framework?

By taking these questions into consideration, the scope of the present workshop is a twofold one: on the one hand, we wish to ask, from a philosophical point of view, what kind of displacement does a foreign language imply. On the other hand, we want to give voice to an intercultural dialogue where the question is itself considered *from the foreign*, that is, from a place that displaces our theoretical stance.