

What Language for What Europe?

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Roberto Orsi

By [Roberto Orsi](#)

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In his [discourse](#) about Europe and the European project pronounced on 22nd February 2013 at the Bellevue Palace in Berlin, German *Bundespräsident* Joachim Gauck has articulated his view on the future development of the European polity, reinstating the idea of a public sphere extended to all member states and their populations. As already noted by [Maria Kyriakidou in an earlier post on this blog](#), this call for a European public sphere is not a particularly new, nor original idea. It has already been explored, both in intellectual debates and in some practical applications (e.g. the TV channels Euronews and partially ARTE), at least from the 1990s. Many will remember the article “[After the War: the Rebirth of Europe](#)” (*Nach dem Kriege: Der Wiedergeburt Europas*) by [Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida](#), published ten years ago in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In that contribution, Habermas and Derrida celebrated the birth of a European public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*), and advanced a series of proposals for the accelerated integration of a core of European countries (*Kerneuropa*), which should have effectively amounted to the creation of a European federal state. Ten years on, it is impossible not to read that article as overly optimistic not only about the process of European integration as carried out by political leaders, but also with reference to the existence of a European public sphere. Gauck’s speech is in this sense the admission that little progress was made during the last decade in the direction which was predicted then, and that we are effectively back to square one with regard to an enhanced process of European unification.

Gauck’s proposal seems to envisage the creation of a Europe-wide *agora*, where not only the professional of international communication would participate (from journalist to diplomats, from academics to EU bureaucrats), but possibly every European citizen. To this end, the German president stresses the necessity of creating a new European linguistic environment: “In Europe there are 23 recognised official languages (*Amtssprachen*), in addition to countless other languages and dialects. A German, who does not speak either English or French, will have few chances to communicate with a Portuguese, and even less with a Lithuanian or a Hungarian.” And even if the young generation uses English as *lingua franca*, “the linguistic integration should not be simply left to the way things go. More Europe means namely not only more plurilingualism for the elites, but plurilingualism for larger and larger sectors of the population, more and more people, for everybody!” However, this advocated plurilingualism should be somehow subordinated to the establishment of a “practicable English” (*ein praktikables Englisch*), a “common language” (*gemeinsame Sprache*), which would allow the realisation of Gauck’s political “dream”, i.e. the creation of a European agora, an ideal place for discussion and democratic contestation.



If observed from a historical and political perspective, Gauck’s proposal appears somehow simplistic. Not so much for the specific choice of the English language, but for the very absence of a more articulated rationale, which is supposed to underpin this strategic choice. The problem here is an issue of method. English seems to be the obvious choice from a sheer pragmatic perspective. But then, behind the pragmatism, more or less subconscious mechanisms of depoliticisation are easy to spot. What decision is, indeed, more “political” than the choice of language the members of a political community are supposed to speak? However, Gauck’s position is not isolated, as shown in a [recent study authored by Jürgen Gerhards](#) published by the *Wissenschaftszentrum für*

Sozialforschung in Berlin. Gerhards argues that English should be the *lingua franca* of Europe pointing to the gains for everybody in terms of geographic mobility and integration of all peoples within the same European public sphere. English, as it appears, is already the more widespread first and second language in the EU.

This reasoning heavily underestimates the importance of linguistic politics, whereby language related questions are always, as Noam Chomsky [1] has said, questions of power. Languages are not simply means for communication. Advocating English or Arabic as the language of a certain political community is not just a question pertaining to the sounds people produce to understand each other, but especially the sort of cultural background they constantly evoke through the use of a specific language. Languages, with their histories, their literatures and through grammar structures, shape the way people think. For instance, as Bruno Snell famously argued [2], there would have never been any philosopher in Greece, if the Greek language did not have a definitive article. That is perhaps why Greeks have been better philosophers than the Romans, whose language has no definitive article.

History offers a great number of examples in which choosing a language for an existing or new political community has gone far beyond sheer pragmatic considerations, and rightly so. In a very entertaining book published two decades ago, *La Ricerca della Lingua Perfetta nella Cultura Europea* (The Search for the Perfect Language in the European Culture) Umberto Eco [3] reconstructed the intriguing history of this topic over the course of several centuries, between attempts to establish an existing language as the perfect, or primordial, or sacred one, and others who have tried to invent new artificial languages, largely for the purpose of overcoming nationalistic sentiments, as it happened in the late nineteenth century with the emergence of *Volapük* and Esperanto.

Within the Zionist movement, although Theodor Herzl initially thought that the German language should have been given precedence as the language of a future Jewish state, since most of the Jewish population of the time spoke either German or Yiddish, upon the establishment of the state of Israel the miraculous resurgence of Hebrew took place, a language which was “dead” for over two thousand years, and used solely for liturgical purposes. This resurgence occurred against any pragmatic consideration.

In Turkey, Mustafa Kemal’s founding of the modern Turkish republic involved the invention of a national language which, although conceived as a purified continuation of the Ottoman Turkish, it is now so much removed from it, that the latter seem almost unintelligible to a modern Turk, not to mention the shift from the Arabic to the Latin script. Ironically, Kemal’s speeches of the 1920s have to be translated in order to be accessible to today’s Turkish speakers. In the Turkish case, pragmatism was pushed aside by much deeper political considerations concerning the identity of the political community, and the direction that a certain linguistic policy was supposed to indicate.

The establishment of Mandarin as the official language of China, currently spoken by the vast majority of the Chinese people, is also a relatively recent phenomenon, as Mandarin was chosen as the official idiom only in 1932 over a variety of different alternatives, mainly classical Chinese (the cultural equivalent of Latin in China), in an effort to imitate Western and Japanese patterns of modernisation. Mandarin was initially spoken only by a fraction of China’s population.

All these examples simply want to illustrate that linguistic decisions are indeed *political*: they depend or relate back to the kind of political project which the leaders of a specific community have in mind (if any). It depends on the political choice of what kind of cultural background, what literatures, what poetry, what epic, which myths, what rhetorical spirit should be prevalent in future generations. It is not only a question of pragmatism, as pragmatism may well lead nowhere when it’s visionless. The *lingua franca* of Europe may well be English, of course, but there must be a rationale behind this decision which has to be articulated more comprehensively, and with full acceptance of the political implications which it may entail.

If the choice of a common language descends from the nature of the political project fostered by its leaders, it should ideally reflect, to put it simply, its core “values”. Gauck’s vision of Europe, however, is somehow contradictory. On the one hand, Europe has its special character, and it is different from the rest: it is Europe. On the other, Europe is essentially about “peace and freedom, democracy and rule of law (*Rechtsstaatlichkeit*), equality, human rights and

solidarity". This list of values, however, offers nothing specifically European. With little nuances, it could be perfectly adopted by the US, or Brazil, or even Japan. Not to mention that Europe, and its idea, however one might choose to define it (something that deserves at least another post), has existed well before democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Hence, the essence of Europe should be found somewhere else. But Gauck himself offers us a way out of this problem, when he states: "we the Germans know well, deep in our hearts, that there is something tying us to Europe in a special way. It was in our country that the attempts to destroy everything European, all universal values were unleashed." Europe as a political project is then the overcoming of the guilt of the terrible events of the twentieth century (at least from a German point of view). What language can better reflect the purpose of keeping this memory at the centre of the European political project? Modestly, I would like to propose the German language. Only the German language can, as opposed to the global character of English, entail something specifically "European" and ensure that the European culture continues to be anchored, philosophically and historically, in reflection about the twentieth century's catastrophic political and cultural experiences, the founding, tragic *μῦθος* of our European nations. Only the German language can deliver the internalisation of such heritage in the conscience of every European. And by embracing their language, Europe will be finally reconciled with the Germans, overcoming anxieties and fear by means of a therapeutic exposure to the object of our innermost phobias. We may need a more German Europe after all.

- [1] Noam Chomsky, *Language and Responsibility*, Pantheon Publishers, New York 1979.
- [2] Bruno Snell, *La Cultura Greca e le Origini del Pensiero Europeo*, Einaudi, Torino 1963.
- [3] Umberto Eco, *La Ricerca della Lingua Perfetta nella Cultura Europea*, Edizioni Laterza, Roma-Bari 1993. English translation by James Fentress: *The Search for the Perfect Language in the European Culture*, Blackwell, Oxford 1995.