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## **COMMENT ON VALTER LANG'S ARTICLE ARCHAEOLOGY AND LANGUAGE**

In his article, Valter Lang expresses his anxiety about the language(s) of international discussion in archaeology. From the point of view of a student of archaeology in Turku, some of the arguments presented by Lang, seem slightly exaggerated. For a long time, the right to use one's mother tongue has been politically unquestionable in Finland. As far as the Finnish-speaking majority<sup>1</sup> is concerned, the appropriateness of the Finnish language as a means of communication in all fields is widely accepted.

### **THE MOTHER TONGUE AND OTHER LANGUAGES AS POLITICAL TOOLS**

I agree with Lang's statement that archaeology as a science is local by nature and I also share his view of the role of archaeology as a national science or discipline. Although the number of professional archaeologists is small and public interest in our area of research remains (unfortunately) at a fairly modest level, archaeology is an important branch of cultural studies. As one specialized group, we cooperate in building a general mental image which, depending on context, could be called the "national identity", "collective idea of our past", "roots of a nation" *etc.* This picture is conveyed to the public (and to ourselves!) by means of language, in the first place, although even illustrations, sound effects, experiences achieved through participating in experiments *etc.* no doubt belong to modern popularization as well.

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The effective transmission of information - in other words, marketing and selling - is possible only if texts are easy to read. In practice, they have to be written in the mother tongue of the audience, fluently and in a style "popular" enough to be readable to anyone. Needless to say, the contents of the text should be carefully checked, too. An extremely important goal of popularizing archaeological information (and nowadays this may already be its main goal) is to influence public opinion and to gain sympathetic interest towards our area of study, especially excavations and other fieldwork. Thus, those responsible for giving information are a kind of "trailblazer" element of our scholarly community, having a high degree of responsibility for our resources and the image of our discipline, as also pointed out by Lang. The most natural working language in the "front line" is the language of the local society. Using it in a skilful and effective way is itself a challenge and, I would claim, failures in this area are far too common.

In Finland, the choice of the language of a message directed to the general public is in most cases self-evident and is not associated with any kind of political protest. The situation may be different, though, in areas where the dominant language is Swedish. In these areas local media does valuable work to maintain the cultural atmosphere of the Swedish-speaking population and to support its development. In his article, Lang mentions the process of the linguistic and, in fact, also ethnic Russification of e.g. the Mordvinians. From a Finnish perspective, this comparison seems quite remote. In order to understand it as a threatening scenario we need to go into the details of the recent history of the small Fenno-Ugrian nations of Russia and to study the true reasons for the crisis

of linguistic identity among young people and the intelligentsia in these areas. (I believe that Lang's idea would be better understood in northernmost Finland by persons with personal experience of using Sámi as their mother tongue.) Compared with Finland, the recent history of the Estonians is far more closely connected with the present situation of the many Fenno-Ugrian peoples currently living in Russia.

The significant role of active cultural policies in Estonia during the process of striving for independence has not been forgotten. It is thus completely understandable that as an archaeologist Lang is now ready to take heavy responsibility for the national cultural independence of the Estonians. He links this with the issue of language much more closely than would seem necessary to me. On the contrary, using only the national languages can sometimes seem to be rather a disadvantage than an advantage in practical situations in Finland. Tourism, for instance, is a multilingual industry where all products have to be available at least in English, and in many cases also in German and Russian. A museum exhibition where the texts can be read in Finnish and Swedish only, will hardly win the favour of any international visitors (especially if they discover the lack of English translations before paying the entrance fee).

#### DIFFERENT LANGUAGES - DIFFERENT STATUSES

The basis of popular archaeology (hopefully) rests on scientific discussion. The main emphasis of Lang's article is on the question in which language(s) this exchange of views should take place. Lang points out that discussion on an international forum usually flows slowly. Many periodicals are published only at long intervals, and as far as papers presented on congresses or seminars are concerned, it is not uncommon to wait for years for their publication. But, as a matter of fact, we are not in a hurry, either. In most cases, only a few researchers participate in discussion or the group of people who are really interested in a special question is very limited. I fully agree with Lang in that the quality of our scientific discussion cannot be improved only by choosing to publish in English or some other widely known language. The use of "secret" (*ergo* small) languages is no problem if the circle of specialists remains small. From this it follows that the idea of

making discussion more "open" by changing its language sounds quite artificial as a solution.

In the present situation, I believe there already exists a clear distinction between the status of periodicals and books published in Finnish and those published in other languages. This means that the choice of publication language is in fact not connected with language politics but rather a question of practical realities. The quality of certain archaeological periodicals published in Finnish has improved considerably over the past few years and good articles about archaeology are frequently published even in some other cultural publications in Finland. Despite this it is obvious that articles published in the so called international forum - in English, Swedish (in Sweden; a Finnish archaeologist writing in Swedish will not in all cases use his / her mother tongue and the generalization made by Lang in this respect does not hold true) or German - give higher merits than texts written in Finnish and published at home.

The two-tiered system described above is unofficial, being maintained partly unconsciously and seen differently by different people. Depending on the topic in question it may sometimes work more openly than in other cases but we still cannot deny its existence. The possibility to contribute to scientific debate in one's mother tongue becomes mere idealism if compared to a chance to get space in an esteemed international refereed publication. And articles published in a foreign language tend to be of high quality because the criteria of getting the text published are likely to be high and the translation will also cost money. As a matter of fact, we do have a certain index system in archaeology although it works in a way different from its counterpart that is common in the natural sciences or in medicine as described by Lang. Since accountability for results was introduced in universities and other research institutes, the indexing and counting of credit points has become everyday life even in coarse financial terms, although this side of the coin is not always mentioned.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHIES AS MIRRORS OF PREFERENCES

Discussion in the humanistic disciplines (or "soft" sciences as they are called by Lang) in general differs considerably from the "real" natural sciences (by these Lang obviously refers to areas of

fast development, such as genetics). This is why I do not believe that indexing articles according to how often they have been referred to would work, for instance, in archaeology. This type of index would hardly tell anything about the real scientific significance of the article in question (although it might show something about its provocativeness or degree of self-contradiction).

Neither do I believe that the statistics compiled by Lang would really tell much about how the writers see the value or usefulness of articles published in different languages. Certainly we can get some idea about the linguistic environment of a writer on the basis of the lists of references given by him or her. Lack of knowledge of a language is easily considered a good reason to exclude even important literature from a bibliography. Accordingly, knowledge of a language may serve as a legitimate excuse to use quite marginal publications as sources of research. But I would claim that another important reason why books and periodicals published in small languages are less known and less used is lack of money.

With regard to libraries, appropriations are cut year after year and materials written in small languages are the first to be dropped from lists of purchase. Consequently, fewer people are likely to see them and, as they do not appear in bibliographies, no interest in them will arise elsewhere. Distance loans from libraries and photocopies of articles cost money and it may be a significant effort to obtain them. It is thus self-evident that a less known publication will not wind up in the bibliography of another article as easily as a periodical which is published in English and easy to leaf through in the library of our own institute. It is also easy to refer to an article quickly and only because it happens to contain an interesting idea. Thus, periodicals (in English) automatically dominate in statistics based solely on lists of references. Getting a book from a remote library and reading it require much more work while references to monographs may be references to materials of basic importance.

#### LINGUISTIC PLURALISM: A SOURCE OF MENTAL WEALTH

Finnish and Estonian are both small languages. It is practically impossible to study archaeology or to work on the field of archaeology - let alone do any research - without being able to read and

communicate in several other languages as well. More generally speaking, both in Finland and in Estonia a good knowledge of as many foreign languages as possible is of major importance because of competition for work and positions.

On the other hand, common feature to both countries is also an acute need to actively write and publish in the national language. This is necessary in order to keep terminologies up to date in all areas. Otherwise we will soon find ourselves using more and more loan-words and loan translations and even the written language will develop towards linguistically poor and artificial slang. In Finnish universities (not only in archaeology) a considerable part of required reading is already now in English. While financial resources for arranging lectures continually diminish, the number of required books grows and the proposition of British and American literature is rather likely to grow than to decrease. In the present situation, however, there is no reason to believe that archaeological discussion in Finnish would considerably suffer from this. On the contrary, one of the "by-products" of archaeological knowledge appears to be good means to express our thoughts about it in more than one language.

But there is a much more serious reason for anxiety. Geographically, our country is situated on a linguistic border. From the point of view of cultures and contact systems in prehistoric times, the area now divided by the eastern border of Finland is a natural whole. The division between the Anglo-Saxon / Scandinavian area (as far as flow of information is considered, Finland belongs on this side) on one hand and the Russian area on the other hand is still sharp despite remarkable changes in the political situation. There exists a linguistic wall generating significant effort in connecting information from one side with that on the other side. I hope that in the future we will be able to interrelate archaeological knowledge from Western Russia (and why not Siberia as well) with those fragments of information that have so far been collected in this small coastal area called Finland. This could radically change the whole picture of our prehistory. And our first step in this project is to learn the language of our neighbouring country, Russian.

Lang poses the question whether it is necessary in general to know the foreign languages spoken in our neighbouring areas. Although Estonian is the only big language (all things being

relative) in the world that we can easily learn on the basis of the close linguistic kinship we prefer to speak Finnish or English with our Estonian colleagues. In the Baltic area (which itself is an archaeologically interesting whole) at least ten different languages are spoken. Here, English is a foreign language for everyone. Its use cannot be avoided but I do not see why it should be strongly encouraged, either. I feel that archaeologists should discuss archaeology in the first place, and to achieve this we should feel free to use all means of communication available: words of different languages and, if need be, also illustrations, the Internet, other technical means included etc.

Archaeologists can, and should, participate in the cultural politics of their own countries. In contemporary Europe, this task varies a lot depending on the country in question. Nor would this role of archaeology benefit from the goal-oriented development of a *lingua franca*.

Lang's arguments for the understandable differences between the modes and language(s) of discussion in the human and natural sciences respectively are based on the idea that there is no uniform science. Thus, the rules of the game may be different in different areas. I agree with him and I would point out that the representatives of the

human sciences have no reason for any kind of inferiority complex. Science as a general concept is an abstract term. In fact there are several independent subsystems although it is self-evident that these, too, have common denominators. Language as a means of communication does not need to work in an exactly similar way in all systems, i.e. in all areas of science. Any trials to make a tool fit new conditions without allowing changes in the tool itself mean that valuable possibilities may be lost. As native speakers of a small language we have several choices of language in which to verbalize our thoughts and the choice may be different in different situations. In the human sciences, the desperate following of so-called trends adopted from outside can sometimes only be done at a very high cost. On no account should we abandon our most significant tool for analysing reality - the rich and flexible symbol system which is our mother tongue.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In Finland, both Finnish and Swedish are official languages.