

Valter Lang

POLITICS, SCIENCE OR MONEY? A REPLY

I am very grateful to Mervi Suhonen, Brian Boyd, Tom Reuter and Bernhard Hänsel for their comments on my paper on the use of language use in archaeology. For the most part, these comments do not argue against what was said in the article; rather they expand and supplement my standpoints with additional thoughts. It makes me, on the one hand, glad, but on the other hand, even a little sad because my paper might afterwards look like breaking in an open door. However, some statements in Suhonen's paper demonstrate that here, too, different opinions may occur. In this reply, I try to comment on at least some of her arguments.

To begin with, I did not understand Suhonen's reproach concerning too close a link between the native language and national cultural independence. I just do not understand how such a linkage can ever be *too* close. The example of tourism seems to be irrelevant because this is a domain orientated everywhere, first of all, towards foreigners and therefore it simply must be multilingual. Hopefully this example was not thought to state that science – archaeology in particular – is likewise orientated to foreigners. I have never claimed, either, that the contribution to scientific (international) debate should only be in one's own mother tongue. What I really wanted to state was that there must *also* be room for scientific literature in native languages, that one should *also* pay attention to its development – and that in some countries, such as Estonia for instance, it must be done more effectively than before. Globalization and the move towards monolingual science continue anyway but I think that their inevitability and necessity are by no means proved – at least not in the humanities. Therefore one should point not only to advantages but also disadvantages and dangers of this process. We can call such an operation mere idealism – as Suhonen does – but in this context, I am truly glad for such an accolade.

According to Suhonen, there already exists a real distinction between the status of periodicals and books published in Finnish in Finland, and those published in other (larger) languages abroad. She thinks that this is not due to language politics but practical needs and calculations – such as, for instance, greater competition to be published and the expense of translation that select the best works to be translated and published in foreign languages and abroad. On the one hand, I suspect a little, how big the role of practical calculations really is when choosing the language of publishing, and what is the role of, for example, national inferiority complexes. I do not deny at all that there are sometimes serious reasons and circumstances why one should (or even must) publish some works in foreign languages – they were already discussed in my main paper. On the other hand, I would like to ask – as an *idealist* – *why* all this should be as it is? When talking about differences in status one should bear in mind that status is not an objective or unchanging thing, that it is formed in certain social conditions and depends on people's estimations of value which may change if conditions change. This time, the different statuses of scientific works published either in one's own country or abroad are established by either scientists themselves or the bureaucrats of science and – at least in Estonia and Finland – there are clear trends that this system of evaluation is regarded as official. In both cases, I do not understand why it is accepted that in the native languages one may publish all kinds of rubbish, to produce incompetent and inefficient scholarship, while everything published in larger foreign languages is excellent and important. I could point to many opposite examples but I will leave them aside for the time being.

Suhonen repeatedly refers to money. According to her, the use of works published in small lan-

guages is limited not only by incomprehensibility of these languages but also by the decreasing financial means of libraries – appropriations are cut year after year and materials written in small languages are the first to be dropped from the lists of purchases. No doubt, this is really the case. Yet it does not explain the main substance of the problem. Proceeding both from this logic and statistics on language environments of some archaeologies presented in my article, one may conclude that the poorest countries are the United Kingdom and Germany where monolingual references dominate in scientific publications. The richest country is obviously Estonia because it seems that there is enough money to purchase books from many different countries. Nonsense, isn't it? I think that the question is more of a lack of will and sometimes even a (subconscious) attitude towards the consideration that the cultural and scientific creativity of small nations is less important than that of larger nations. This is something that originates from an interlaced world of scientific colonialism and national inferiority complexes.

Yet, Suhonen is also right in many ways when stressing such material aspects of this problem. This is actually what the economic mechanism of globalization looks like – it is simply much cheaper for the whole world to be monolingual. Lack of money together with wrong policies of the evaluation of science automatically lead to the domination of publications in English in our bibliographies and next in the lists of references of our scientific writings. And here lies, at the same time, the greatest danger for such a monoglot science. As a very large portion of archaeological information is inevitably published in many other languages – including small and “incomprehensible” languages – the scientific competence of both monolingual writers and their monolingual referees will decrease very sharply. The result is something which formally seems to be high quality science but with content that becomes incompetent and inefficient. The whole matter also became clear from Suhonen's hope that the understanding of Russian archaeological information could – in the future – radically change the whole picture of our (i.e. Finnish) prehistory. But what then is the problem? This information has already existed long ago. One simply has to read and understand it! In any case, this is a good example of the negative influence of narrowly monodirectional language orien-

tation. I am sure that the same fate could have happened to Estonia if we had not been occupied in 1940. On the other hand, belonging to the Soviet Union was accompanied by too strong a linguistic orientation to the east. However, as this was an obliged orientation, it automatically caused a reaction and a striving to learn other languages as well. Nowadays, in times of new independence and despite freedom for all kinds of choices, there is a great danger to overtake Finland again in terms of one-sided language orientation.

As a remark, I would like to mention that in addition to a rather sharp linguistic border between Finland and Russia, which is hard to cross for both sides – as Suhonen writes – there also exists another linguistic border – between Finland and Sweden. The latter can be crossed mostly in one direction, from the west to the east, but usually not vice-versa. I found an interesting sentence in a book published recently in Sweden, in Swedish, about a monograph by the Finnish archaeologist Jukka Luoto, which was published in Finland (1984) only in Finnish: “*Luotos arbete saknar sammanfattning på annat språk än finska, varför den är mycket svårtillgänglig*”.¹ One can draw several conclusions from this sentence that all are relevant in this context. Firstly, it mirrors the attitude of a representative of a larger nation towards his smaller neighbour (by the way, a similar attitude and one-way linguistic border can also be noticed between the Finns and the Estonians, as Suhonen already wrote). Secondly, it demonstrates that because of not knowing the language of one's neighbour, the scientific competence of a researcher and, hence, the level of the text written by him or her are seriously questioned. Thirdly, scientific writings in native languages must certainly have a summary in foreign languages. Fourth, a reference to a work in a foreign language does not necessarily mean that this text has also been understood – this is, no doubt, a failing of the diagrams added to my main paper. It should be mentioned that such a sentence would be absolutely impossible in any publication within the Estonian academic tradition – or that of any other small nation.

In conclusion, I would state once again that the language use in science, particularly in humanities, is based, in the first place, on a political decision. Of course, the political aspect is accompanied by some purely scientific and – as Suhonen

convincingly argued – economic calculations. The latter obviously carries less weight than the former, as one may conclude from the circumstance that the publishing in native languages would be, paradoxically, cheaper than translation into foreign languages. Nevertheless, the number of monographs published in native languages is decreasing. That the pure-science arguments, either, are not always in the first place when choosing the language was demonstrated in my main paper. In this way, we reach the questions of Boyd: who has the authority to make corresponding political decisions and how can one challenge them? The answer to the first question depends on the political system of the particular country and the level of colonization of its culture and science. In a totalitarian state, like the USSR was, the corresponding system was strictly fixed by the state: for instance, from 1975 onwards all dissertations had to be written only in Russian (even those made in

the national republics). Even in democratic societies, the use of language and the place of publishing may be “recommended”, in one way or another, by the bureaucrats of science, as shown by the experience of Estonia and Finland. Yet, personal freedom and, hence, the responsibility of every scientist are much more broader here than in totalitarian societies. I think that the political decision in question has to be done by the researchers themselves. Before doing so, however, one has to make clear all the problems and consequences accompanying that decision. I hope that our discussion here has made a contribution to making corresponding decisions and challenging all attempts from the outside to influence them.

NOTES

- ¹ As only the general principles are important in this context, I do not refer to the author or the book.