

MULTILINGUALISM IN THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES

Research in the arts and humanities in Europe has been characterised by multilingualism for centuries. Moreover, a feature of leading research has always been that languages do not represent barriers; rather, significant findings are noted irrespective of the language of publication. Indeed, ignorance of scholarship due to a lack of language skills is considered a gross academic shortcoming. Multilingualism can be recognised in the publishing culture of leading academic journals, but also in the linguistic culture that was and often still is encountered at international conferences. In European academic culture, a structure has developed that recognises languages such as French, English and German, and often Italian too, as overarching languages, with the addition of other languages depending on the culture of the specialist area in question.

In many respects, multilingualism is a foundation of the arts and humanities: language is much more than a mere technical instrument for communicating research findings. While a shared professional language may suffice in a more technical-descriptive field, this does not hold for hermeneutics, a core aspect of work in the arts and humanities. Here, interpretation and orientation is closely bound up with linguistic cultures and their epistemological traditions. The variety of approaches is deeply related to linguistic and hence cognitive and cultural perspectives, and the European arts and humanities have achieved a very high level of nuanced interpretation within this linguistic-cognitive plurality. Multilingualism also guarantees the orientational role which the humanities must perform in a social context. All significant cultural debates take place in the European national languages. The translations of significant works in the field take on sustained importance since European culture is based on linguistic variety.

This variety in academic culture has been under threat from the science policy of the last two decades on both the European and the national level. For purportedly utilitarian and technocratic reasons, English has often been promoted as a common language and has often virtually been forced upon scholars, for instance when they apply to major funding bodies. Even research on topics in linguistics, literature or cultural studies in important European languages is required to be conducted in English. However, an academic education focusing one-sidedly on English frequently leads to a situation in which younger researchers can no longer access older but still valid research findings. Such a monolingual approach thus does not advance but rather undermines recent efforts to promote excellence in research and risks a regression to a level of knowledge long since surpassed.

This regression in knowledge and decline in quality are not the only consequences of an enforced monolingual science policy. Another risk is the theoretical and terminological impoverishment of all other European scientific languages.

A particular concern is the separation of academic research and its reception within society, meaning that the humanities can no longer perform their role in providing orientation, which in today's world has become more important than ever.

A monolingual humanities becomes removed from the great debates in European society that continue to be held in national languages. It produces a rift between a small academic elite and the great majority of European societies, thus also endangering the necessary social legitimacy of research in the field. Hence it is of central importance to develop a strategy of multilingualism in the humanities in Europe. This is both an academic and political necessity. It guarantees progress in knowledge and at the same time re-connection to society. Such a strategy applies to both academic training and the re-orientation of the language policy of leading research funding bodies. This is the only way it can make a crucial contribution to European solidarity, by making use of the continent's cultural wealth, promoting scholarship and improving the social cohesion of Europe as a whole.