



Intellectuality and the Public Invisibility of Linguistics

by Ingo H. Warnke

... dedicated with gratitude to all linguists who read Immanuel Kant, watch Julian Rosefeldt, listen to Uum Kulthum or something similar, and anyone else with an intellectual interest in their own profession ...

There is an academic discipline professionally dedicated to language; I am talking about linguistics. But were linguistics to be abandoned from one day to the next, nobody would really notice, I claim, except for linguists themselves. This speaks to a public invisibility that can be of advantage; one can pursue one's interests without excitement, without really getting interrupted, except by one's peers with whom one has to enter into discussions, perhaps even quarrels once in a while. There is certainly something to be said for letting a discipline grow in an environment largely undisturbed by others from outside. But such a life in the *hortus conclusus*, concealed from the public, comes with decisive disadvantages. One can quickly get bored, and in such a secluded sphere, one tends to encounter only oneself and one's own kind. What is more, one has to leave one's discipline when one gets hungry for something else.

But isn't that paradoxical? On the one hand there is no human form of expression that is as omnipresent, complex, multifaceted, imaginative, and generally complicated as the languages that we constantly speak and write and whisper and shout out and moan and laugh and cry. On the other hand, the larger public is oblivious to a field ostensibly dedicated to languages—if we consider linguistics a science of languages in a comprehensive sense. Put bluntly, language is everywhere, linguistics nowhere. Of course there are the clever computer linguists who teach Google to do its thing, and obviously there are forensic linguists who solve crimes, and there certainly are applications of linguistics which are “significant” because they have “obvious” technical, social, and political implications and utility. But as a field, linguistics is nonetheless largely invisible because we see Google, criminal prosecution, political success and failure and all the rest, but not linguistics itself. I think every linguist knows the following situation: you are asked what you do for a living. You answer: “linguistics”. And then there is this exaggerated, awkward pause followed by an expression of emphatic interest that is intended to cover up a complete lack of knowledge, and there are questions, and you have to explain what you do and why you do it, and you get a feeling that your interlocutor is not quite convinced. Were you a tax consultant, plumber, comedian, physician, mechanic, climate researcher or garbage collector, the conversation would somehow go more smoothly. Why is that? First of all because of the basic fact that linguistics has little visibility—be this desired or not. One lives behind one's wall and grows interesting plants. In this sense, linguistics is actually likable because it is unobtrusive. But such an impression is also deceptive since linguists can comport themselves with a high degree of self-esteem and meaningfulness in the garden of their discipline, showing a great interest in keeping weeds and other surprises from growing in the care-

fully maintained beds and patches, as if anyone would notice. What seems plain and inconspicuous to the outside corresponds to a measured-out strictness inside the walls of the garden.

But let us stay with linguistics on the outside, in the world. To concern oneself with the *hortus conclusus* on the inside, to ask questions about the number of colonial plants nourished and cherished there, for instance, or the extent to which national traditions resound in their language terminology and so on, would be a different analysis which could lead to a call for a queering of linguistics. But this is not my concern here. I am interested in a linguistics in the world, in the outside, in public and, closely connected, in the search for a world, an outside, a public in the construction of linguistic objects. Let us think about the public invisibility of linguistics. Let me, as a linguist, deplore the fact that the field finds so little resonance, and express a sense of sorrow about this fact, and the fact that linguistics emits sounds that find so little echo. Were linguists opera singers, they could not be promised grand careers.

Of course, one could train one's voice, loosen up, yawn, open resonance chambers. But this is precisely what linguistics rarely and reluctantly does. The field is seldom relaxed and tends toward cramped postures, at times toward slight, obstructive coughing. Obviously, this is speaking partially, even polemically. But I think linguistics knows very well what I mean. There are also, self-evidently, many savvy actors in linguistics who intervene in public discourse, in blogs, at conferences, in newspaper articles and many other fora—they jump over walls they may not even see. Accordingly, I do not mean to suggest across the board that no one is publicly engaged. But then again, only a few are. Linguistics, as a disciplinary order, is uptight. I see it that way. I would be glad to be proven wrong, accused of ignorance or blindness. It would be nice to see a different kind of linguistics, situated wholly in the world. How good that would be! Yet I still do not believe in it.

We are actually talking about a disposition in linguistics, a leaning away from public engagement toward disciplinary closure, a stronger interest in its own ideas about language than in what others think about language. Linguistics digs deep and does not reach out in breadth. Perhaps it is a field for nerds, which could actually be rather charming, were it not for the safe breeding of exemplary structure trees in institutionally guarded greenhouses in lieu of taking an interest in the much more interesting endless variety of languages. And indeed, linguistics not only leans away from the public but also excludes the world. And this is where the strict face of the groundskeeper appears. *Mind you, this is not proper linguistics.* This sentence is often uttered, extremely disciplining, excluding, bitter—not least young, interested, curious colleagues hear the grumpy coughing, especially when trying to wander off into the vast terrain of language. You won't get away with such curiosity, you would be better off venerating the groundskeeper; back to the system patches. In other words, the discipline does not necessarily encourage creativity, not to mention subversion. One could also say it does not precisely make being creative easy.

It is about time to come to the colorful figure of the intellectual to whom this whole journal issue is dedicated, for which I am grateful. The intellectual is a smart figure of powerful, independent judgment who pursues various interests simultaneously; who listens to what is said and says what has to be said; who bears contradictions, finds creative and surprising solutions; who does not accept boundaries in thinking and saying; who is in the world, and in whom the world resonates. In short, the intellectual is a figure of complex resonances, a figure of epistemic openness. We have to note, unfortunately, that the habitat of linguistics is not exactly the preferred dwelling place of the intellectual. The linguistics that I know is essentially disinterested in such worldliness. It does not give a fig for the expectations of an intellectual who would ponder the free-floating potency of language. Naturally, this has consequences: there are preferences for evidence of phrasal structures in corpora, not for shouting, groaning, spitting, whispering, silencing, hollering, stuttering—even though all of this also belongs to language. In short: linguistics does not seem to be an intellectually inspiring place, as it does not invite intellectuals into its discussions about language.

One reason for this intellectual reticence, which I am convinced is the equivalent of public invisibility, lies in a radical distinction that linguistics drew during the twentieth century at the latest, and which came into effect

no more visibly than in the person of Noam Chomsky, a key figure in linguistics. Chomsky was unquestionably a linguist acting in a public resonance chamber and perceiving the world, just as the world perceived him. What a stroke of luck, one might think. But it was precisely this Noam Chomsky who also massively fortified the immurement of linguistics. Strangely, the linguist Chomsky and the intellectual Chomsky acted in strict isolation from each other. And as a result, Chomsky by no means encouraged intellectual desire in linguistics, just as he was unable to arouse linguistic interest in the world.

Chomsky is virtually *the* figure associated with dividing linguistics from public intellectuality; he is *the* dissociated agent in the fields of his reception, precisely because he is an intellectual and a linguist. In an interview in the journal *Radical Anthropology*, British anthropologist Chris Knight considers Chomsky's "paradoxical relationship between his activism and his science" (Knight 2010:22). He states: "One component produces science for a definite intellectual constituency while the rest of him produces political stuff for a quite different audience. As a scientist, he's anxious to avoid slipping over into politics; as an activist, he strives to avoid anything to do with science" (Knight 2010:22). What does Knight mean? A close look reveals that this is phrased sharply; it also sounds rather personal, even aggressive. But it also makes a hardly concealed, painful point about the linguistic fear of the world, of politics, of an evaluation of language use, of ethics and potentially of other things, perhaps also of beauty, aesthetics, and scents hidden behind structural descriptions—despite all the pragmatic and other turns that the discipline has carried out. Linguistics is armed against the public interest in language, and has been for a long time. This has to do with language itself, something Knight also notes with reference to Chomsky: "Each separate role comes with its own appropriate conceptual approach and corresponding language, resistant to translation across the divide" (Knight 2010:22). The fear of the world that manifests itself as the exclusion of the intellectual is often paired with a disciplinary language that is inaccessible to an interested public. For a linguist to engage Derrida can be ridiculous to those who lose sense of how ridiculous their own structural analysis can become, were they to care. Knight attempts an interesting biographical explanation of Chomsky's two faces—the "painfully evident tension between the two" (Knight 2010:23). But let's not pursue Chomsky further or, what's more, an evaluation of his works and his school, or the conclusions that Knight draws from his Marxist critique of Chomsky. I am interested in Chomsky only insofar as the discernible paradox of his persona is concerned: engaged and unengaged, interested and uninterested at once. Linguistics occupies a hemispheric field turned away from society in a neatly ordered territory of intellectual action. We could also say that linguistics lives behind its walls in a universe shut off from a public interest in language, habituating disinterest among the general public.

We can examine this on a more abstract level to gain useful insights into the relation between reason and public life in the discipline. This is because the engaged intellectual is exactly the figure who seeks to merge reason and the public. Shouldn't we wish for many more of these figures for linguistics? Shouldn't it be linguists' downright duty to take a stand in an era when verbal violence, extremist language, and ideologically loaded semantics of culture and identity are creating an ever more volatile situation, and not only in Europe? Isn't it naïve to assume that the fire being kindled will stop short of the wall linguistics erected around itself, once scholarly insights are dismantled wholesale as *alternative facts*? Where is linguistics in a world full of public ghosts haunting twenty-first-century language?

Thinking about reason and the public immediately and necessarily leads us to Immanuel Kant and his epoch-making call for the use of reason in 1784. For Kant, the concept of enlightenment first and foremost meant the freedom to understand in the sense of using reason comprehensively: "For enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is *freedom*. And the freedom in question is the most innocuous of all—freedom to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters." (Kant 2009:3) [„Zu dieser Aufklärung aber wird nichts erfordert als F r e i h e i t ; und zwar die unschädlichste unter allem, was nur Freiheit heißen mag, nämlich die: von feiner Vernunft in allen Stücken öffentlichen Gebrauch zu machen“ (Kant 1784:484)]. Do these words also pass over the wall to resonate in the garden of linguistics? Kant speaks of making *public use of one's reason* [*in allen Stücken öffentlichen Gebrauch zu machen*]. Is the division between disciplinary reason and public reason, as we can observe in the case of Chomsky, consistent with this?

As a matter of fact, Kant differentiates between two forms of the use of reason that are seemingly not far from what we encounter in Chomsky: the public and the private use of reason. The public use of reason is that “which anyone may make of it *as a man of learning* addressing the entire *reading public*” (Kant 2009:4) [„jemand als Gelehrter von ihr vor dem ganzen Publikum der Lesewelt macht“ (Kant 1784:485)], and that public use “must always be free” (Kant 2009:3) [„muß jederzeit frei sein“ (Kant 1784:484)]. Private use, in contrast, is that “which a person may make of it in a particular *civil* post or office with which he is entrusted” (Kant 2009:4) [„den er in einem gewissen ihm anvertrauten bürgerlichen Posten, oder Amte, von seiner Vernunft machen darf“ (Kant 1784:485)]. And this use may well be restricted. For office holders, obligations to higher interests spring to mind. But can professors who are given status as civil servants justify their use of private reason alone because they have to consider superior interests? Does this justification also apply to employed professors who depend on third-party funding because their institutions may expect it from them? What about the linguist who represents linguistics? Is intellectuality expressed via the public use of reason really excluded from an institutionalized, disciplining academic life? No, of course not. That is because linguists are not only linguists but part of a public, as representatives of an institution and/or a discipline—and they should be.

I understand *public* here not simply as a subject-specific public. Kant unmistakably explains that someone may have obligations to a position and can yet make public use of reason under the condition that someone “acts as part of the machine also considers himself as a member of a complete commonwealth or even of cosmopolitan society, and thence as a man of learning who may through his writings address a public in the truest sense of the word” (Kant 2009:4) [„sich aber dieser Theil der Maschine zugleich als Glied eines ganzen gemeinen Wefens, ja sogar der Weltbürgergesellschaft anfiehet, mithin in der Qualität eines Gelehrten, der sich an ein Publikum im eigentlichen Verstande durch Schriften wendet“ (Kant 1784:485)]. This is about having a voice in public, being in the world, and seeing the world. We can also understand Kant’s scholar as an intellectual in this sense. And this is the crucial point. It is a question of self-understanding that touches on questions of the internalized control of discourse. Do I consider myself as part of an intellectual, present-day society made up of the citizens of the world, including all of its unresolvable, global contradictions, a society in which I want to raise a public voice, or do I isolate myself and declare everything supposedly adjacent to linguistics as a private matter? Kant himself speaks of a cleric, for instance, who can critically reflect on the doctrines of his church in public, despite his commitment to them. (cf. Kant 2009:5-6 [1784:486-88]).

To think aloud about language and (critically and self-critically) consider linguistics in the field of public discourse, to invite the intellectual in linguistics and in the broader public to participate in discourse—that would be making bold changes in a field which has long declared an express interest in the world of arts, politics, love, hope, music, and much more to be a private matter. Kant speaks of reasoning [*räonniren*], and we know from Michel Foucault (1984:36) that for Kant, this means *to reason for reasoning’s sake*. The intellectual use of reason—what an ideal! And this is what linguistics should be all about: seeing the world in linguistics and linguistics in the world; in other words, creating reasonable reverberations between a world in which language is omnipresent and a discipline that should concern itself boundlessly and fearlessly with that world.

Let us dare to live more intellectuality in linguistics, more world, more sound, more resonance, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary openness, more whispering and yelling, less fear and fewer nominal phrases, more courage and, once in a while, more Broken German (Gardi 2016). One wants to shout out to linguistics: don’t be afraid to break down the wall! Be interested in intellectual dialogue in museums and all those places where the world shines and speaks; in clubs, literature, film, music, improvisation, rites, on beaches, in parliaments, in forests and apartments... in short, let us lift the veil from a discipline detached from the world and air it out with the winds of intellectuality. *Giving a voice as providing hospitality*, as Anne Storch says in her contribution to this issue, and this means listening to one another, being attentive to each other, in dialogue. I think then, linguistics would be an exceedingly attractive field, visible from afar, and were it to

be abandoned, there would be loud screaming.

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