

The Colonialist Connotations of the Term “German Language”

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Abstract

Linguistically speaking, the family of West-Germanic languages contains English (Englisch/Engels), Hoch-Deutsch (Duits/German) and Nederlands (Dutch/Niederländisch). All of them have Germanic roots to a certain degree but each one differs a lot from the languages spoken by any German tribesman in Ancient Roman times. The list shows at once that the terms “Deutsch”, “Duits” and “Dutch” seem to be derived from the same root, while the attributes “hoch”, “nieder” and “neder” refer to geographic distinctions in terms of altitude, i.e. “hoch” or “high” meaning the language spoken in mountainous regions and “neder” or “low” meaning its counterpart of the coastal areas. In this article the process is analyzed in which one of these three languages came to be singled out and referred to as “German” in the early 18th century, while its correct name “High Dutch” was all but completely replaced by the year 1800. This process coincides with the political doctrine of the British Empire as heir to the Roman Empire being developed. The article argues that nothing precludes us now from once again using the correct terminology after the end of this temporary political entity.

Keywords

German Literature, Post-Colonialism, Schiller, Goethe, Wallenstein

1. Introduction

Living languages exist in various dialects and sometimes it is difficult to decide at which point a dialect has become a language of its own right. On the other hand, the speakers of a language will not only communicate with each other but also draw conclusions about geographical peculiarities, social status and level of education when they heard the other one speak.

When Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) from Ireland wrote his novel “Gulliver’s

travels” in 1726 he had his hero Doctor Lemuel Gulliver illustrate the fact that he is a well-educated man of letters by pointing out that he is fluent in both “High Dutch” and “Low Dutch”. Forty-six years prior to that the first dictionary had been published under the title “High Dutch Minerva” and dedicated by its anonymous author (possibly a certain Martin Edler from Jena) to Prince Rupert, Count Palatine of the Rhine, Duke of Bavaria and Cumberland and Vice-Admiral of all England.

But in 1731, Benedikt Beiler from London published his dictionary under the title “A new German grammar”. How come the language had suddenly changed its name? Beiler justifies his endeavour with “the accession of the illustrious House of Hannover to the throne of Great-Britain”, which had “... necessitated some, and induced others”, of all ranks and degrees, reciprocally to the British and German languages. Anxious to be politically correct in the recently founded United Kingdom, the “Clerk of the German church in Trinity-Lane” invents the “British language”, which has never existed to this day and refers to his own mother-tongue as “German”.

Human beings are, to a large extent, defined by their way of talking and by the languages they master. Debasement of languages has always been a hallmark of colonialism—after the Thirty years’ war, the Holy Roman Empire was debased for its very name.

2. West-Germanic Languages

When German tribes settled in various parts of the late Roman Empire, they interacted with the Romans and adopted many aspects of their culture. In France, Italy and Spain new Romance languages developed, while in other areas of Western Europe the three West-Germanic (Brockhaus, 1999) languages English (Englisch/Engels), Hoch-Deutsch (Duits/German) and Nederlands (Dutch/Niederländisch) grew from the same roots.

During Ancient Roman times there had been two provinces called Germania superior et inferior, referring to their geographical situation at “high” and “low” altitudes, respectively. In the Middle ages, when these areas had belonged to the Holy Roman Empire, they had Latin as their official *lingua franca*.

By Jonathan Swift’s lifetime, England and Scotland had joined forces to colonialize several parts of the earth, mainly in North America and Africa. As a sea-power, the British had adopted the peculiar method how the Portuguese and Spanish conquistadores laid claim to “newly discovered” lands: whoever controlled the mouth of a river at the sea coast was regarded to be the legitimate ruler of all the hinterland draining into this particular river. In many instances people did not even know that they had been “discovered”—until the first boats with tax collectors showed up.

3. “Auf Deutscher Erde Unwillkommen”—Not Welcome on Dutch Soil

When talking about Rupert’s land” we refer to a diocese in Canada today, an

area which had been a private colony of the Hudson's Bay company for centuries. But it is only by chance that "Rupert's land" was not situated in the heart of Europe. Prince Rupert, the very same Count Palatine of the Rhine mentioned above, had been born in Prague in 1619 and had been declared Prince of Lusatia (a region in Saxony at the border to modern-day Poland) immediately after his birth. The accession of his father, Frederick V of the Palatinate, to the throne as King of Bohemia, triggered the start of the Thirty year's war—a war which lasted longer than the average life expectancy of Europeans at that time, laid waste to whole countries and reduced the population of what is Germany today by two thirds.

This catastrophic situation attracted adventurous types from the whole of Europe to fight as mercenaries—men of basically the same mindset as Cortez, Pizarro, or other pioneer colonialists. Far from fighting for religious reasons in this alleged conflict between Catholics and Protestants, their goal was to carve out chunks of land for themselves.

Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) has Colonel Buttler, a character from his "Wallenstein" trilogy, praise these unlimited opportunities as follows:

"We have arrived at a great moment; our Times smile upon the brave and resolute. The way small change will wander hand to hand A city and a citadel now switch Their fleeting occupant. Grandsons of ancient Houses take flight, new names, new coats of arms Crop up. A northern people would resume To settle German lands against our will. The Prince of Weimar arms himself to found A mighty principality. And Mansfeld And Halberstadt lacked only longer life To conquer vast possessions by the sword. Among these men who is our Friedland's equal? No object stands so high that a strong man is Not privileged to set his ladder there" (Kimmich, 2017).

For the focus of this article, the translation of the line "To settle German lands against our will" is most revealing. The translation was done in 2017 but the translator seems to have shied away from Schiller's irony in that he has a Catholic Irishman point out that the Protestant Swedes are "not welcome here". In Schiller's original line "auf deutscher Erde unwillkommen" there is no "our will" and who is "we" supposed to be in this context? Buttler fights in the army of General Wallenstein, the Prince of Friedland (whom he murders at the end) and hopes to settle as the owner of some "city or citadel" just like the Swedes he fights against. Noteworthy though, some of the native princes have started to behave like colonialists in their own country—Colonel Buttler mentions Bernhard von Weimar in particular, forefather of the Duke Schiller worked for when he wrote the play.

4. High Dutch Literature

Apart from being a playwright, Schiller was also an eminent historian especially

of the Thirty years war period. He knew about the fate of Prince Ruppert, one of the native “grandsons of ancient houses”, who emigrated to England, fought for the royalists as a general in the English civil war and later took possession of “Rupert’s land” in the Hudson Bay—or that of the migratory mercenary Johan Printz from Sweden, who went on to become governor of the Delaware river hinterland in North America after he had been chased out of the city of Chemnitz in Saxony by a Saxon army.

But the play “Piccolomini” (part two of the trilogy) from which the quote of Colonel Buttler is taken, deals primarily with the decision of Wallenstein, the powerful general, to mutiny against his overlord, the Habsburg Emperor in Austria, rather than sending eight of his regiments to support the Spanish army on their way to the Netherlands. The Low Dutch had been the first to rise-up against the Spanish colonialists and the High Dutch Wallenstein would switch sides rather than help their oppressors—who were certainly not welcome on Dutch soil.

What Friedrich Schiller wanted to achieve with his trilogy was by no means to paint an idealized picture of Wallenstein, whose goal was not so different from that of Buttler after all, although he also wanted to rid his homeland of Spanish, Swedish and any other foreign occupants. Schiller wanted to show the consequences of endless war on the fabric of human society and the desperate struggle to make peace at last.

And he also wanted to establish High Dutch as a language of literature – with himself being the “Deutscher Shakespeare”. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, ten years older than Schiller, had written the first “Shakespearean” play in High Dutch: His “Götz von Berlichingen” deals with the struggles of the reformation in the 16th century. If this was a High Dutch scenario, his second play—“Egmont”—is set in Brussels and is about the fight for freedom of the Netherlands against the Spanish. While both Schiller and especially Goethe were fluent in French and Italian, they chose High Dutch as well as Low Dutch subjects for their plays and saw no reason to believe why one of the two should be more Germanic than the other.

5. Conclusion

It may be co-incidental that the High Dutch language started to be referred to as “German” around the same time when the English (and Scottish) set out to become the heirs of the Roman Empire. In any case, what used to be known as the Holy Roman Empire was—linguistically, so-to-speak—turned into a colonial hinterland inhabited by people speaking “German”, while now only the occupants of the coastal areas with the mouths of the rivers Rhine, Maas and Scheldt spoke “Dutch”.

But whatever the political reasoning may have been at that time, it is now up to us to correct a twisted terminology—if only for the deleterious effects this has in any science.

Post-colonialism has been applied to Europe over the last twenty years (Pucherova & Grafrik, 2015), by Eastern European authors especially from Poland, but we need to go beyond the Austrian and Prussian Empires (both of which ended more than a hundred years ago) and also beyond 1989 when the Soviet Empire ceased to exist. Now it is time at last that the true names of the two old European languages, High Dutch and Low Dutch, be restored to their proper meaning.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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