

THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF GOOD TASTE. ON THE ROLE OF ACADEMIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

STURE ALLÉN

Swedish Academy. Permanent Secretary

«The fire of the Catalan goddesses burns in my heart.» This passage is sung by Corinna, the Roman poetess, in Rossini's remarkable opera «The Journey to Reims». I enjoyed it at a performance last May, and it keeps reverberating in my mind on a day like this, in surroundings like these.

A few years ago the Swedish Academy paid a visit to Prague. On that occasion Vaclav Havel joined us in a toast to the re-establishment of good taste. It seems to me that our spontaneous gesture is worth considering in a less frivolous vein. In fact, the motto given to the Swedish Academy in 1786 by her founder, King Gustavus III, is «Genius and Taste». Obviously, there is a close connection between the concepts of taste and academy.

What, then, is taste? In the words of a well-known concise dictionary it is not only the «faculty of discerning and enjoying beauty or other excellence especially in art and literature» as in *a man of taste*, but also the «disposition or execution of work of art, choice of language, conduct, etc., dictated by or seen in the light of this faculty» as in *the remark was in bad taste*. In other words, there is a typical kernel sense which is applicable in many domains. Good taste stands out, in several respects, as an attitude.

When Arne Naess of Norway, philosopher and ecologist, received the Nordic Prize of the Swedish Academy last year, he made a speech in which he pointed out what he looked upon as mankind's three great tasks in the next century. They were the prevention of wars, the obliteration of misery and want, and the solution of the ecological crisis. I am not going to focus on these missions, but I am convinced that my main theme has bearing on them.

Today, independent evidence from historical linguistics, genetics and archaeology is accumulating to form a new outline of the history of the human

species. One of the most striking observations is the congruence between languages and ethnic groups. This means that linguistic diversity, a great asset in itself, is also a fundamental source in the investigation of the long-term history of *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

Presently, a number of space probes are on their way out of our solar system. They bring various messages from Earth —just in case. On the Voyager probes there are videos with over a hundred photos, well over an hour's music from different places, greetings in sixty languages, and the call of a whale. This consignment deserves our good wishes, like those messages in bottles thrown into the sea.

It is by no means surprising that one of the sixty languages on board is English. But this language has no word —as we have in my part of the world— for the right of common access to private land or, of course, for the absence of precipitation. It was clearly justified to send another fifty-nine languages along.

In this connection, the Drake equation comes to mind. The idea is to try to estimate the number of intelligent civilizations in the Milky Way, our Galaxy. The equation contains a handful of parameters, the values of which are roughly known in some cases, pure guesswork in others, such as the probability that life will arise and evolve into a high-technology civilization. Depending on what values are chosen, the result can be anything between just one civilization and ten billion civilizations. In other words, we can be unique. Let us make this possibility an opportunity.

But does not Murphy's law apply to space probes, anyway, as well as to most other things? If something can go wrong, it will. Or is there some other factor than just bad luck behind the fact that a slice of toast slipping out of your hand tends to land upside down? It has been argued that it is due to the design of the universe. When the slice falls over the edge of the table, gravity does not lead to a spin rate sufficiently fast to bring about a complete revolution. If tables had been taller, the revolution could have been completed. But tables cannot be taller because of man's height. And man cannot be much taller because of the risk of fracturing your skull when you fall over. We shall have to get on, anyhow, and keep a tight hold on our bread. After all, the universe might have been designed for us.

As a matter of fact we have at least five thousand languages on earth. An awful number of them are now passing the border between extant and extinct. This is a big cultural question in view of the fact that every language represents a particular way of perceiving and relating to reality. By virtue of their immense complexity, languages are a great help in the investigation of the brain and its organisation as well as of consciousness. In addition to undermining the histo-

rical study I just mentioned, the loss of languages reduces our chances of gaining these cerebral insights.

In the eighties John Naisbitt wrote his book *Megatrends*, where he discussed ten new directions that could be expected to transform our lives. One of them was the globalization of our economies, which would be accompanied, he argued, by a renaissance in language and cultural assertiveness. The Swedes would become more Swedish, the Chinese more Chinese, and the French, God help us, more French. As a sideline, English would continue to grow as a business language. In addition he maintained that, in order to be really successful, you should be fluent in computer.

Good taste includes mastering one's own language, and since for all of us there is just one language that we really master, every language is a gift of grace. Again, the inevitable conclusion is to take action to support each one. Those who speak X-ish, a non-majority language, shall never more be obliged to see or hear things like «Spitting and speaking X-ish banned».

Should the European Union be an organization where we can misunderstand each other in nine—or twelve or eighteen—languages? My answer is yes, without any hesitation. The alternative is horrifying: the imperialistic supremacy of one or two languages and, as a corollary, one or two cultural varieties. But is diversity not awfully expensive? My answer is no. Diversity is richness. The pluralistic line adopted by the Union is worth every peseta.

In particular, let me stress that there is no such thing as a minor language. This expression is offensive to those who speak such a language and, thus, have it as an integral part of their personality. It is a historical coincidence that some languages are spoken by more people than others. Since the number of speakers is the criterion explicitly or implicitly used, I prefer to speak of non-majority languages. In addition, it seems to me that the idea of reduction through choosing, e.g., just one of the Scandinavian languages is as absurd as choosing, say, one of Portuguese and Spanish or one of Dutch and German.

Academies and universities should face this challenge in their deliberations on good taste. There is a need of instruction for translators and interpreters, of projects in the realm of machine-aided translation, of courses in writing styles, of multi-cultural programmes, etc.

A footnote: there is no need for speakers of non-majority languages to stand there knocking at the door, hat in hand, asking to be admitted. Every cultural sphere has interesting things to contribute. Openness is in the interest of the whole.

Instead of supplication it is time for action. Academic institutions must en- 17

gage in linguistic investigation and systematic language cultivation. The Catalan project headed by Professor Rafel is a case in point. The establishment and consolidation of language banks, the development of tools for natural-language processing, and the detailed elaboration of lexical databases are corner-stones in such programmes, as is the initiative of the European Union to form a network like Parole between centres working along these lines.

The language community must also be encouraged to use its own language. This means that I remind us not to forget the fourth and last of the key principles put forward in the general discussion: identity, creativity, diversity, and participation. Authors play a crucial role here as professional language users setting an example. Furthermore, it is extremely important to bring pressure to bear on those responsible for the choice of natural-language interfaces in computational systems like work-processing programs.

Freedom of expression is fundamental in our overall perspective and indeed in the life of academies. This notion should be underpinned not by making political statements or undertaking political actions but by regarding this freedom as a self-evident integral part of the working platform. By way of example, this is the reason why the Nobel Prize for Literature can be awarded as a literary prize without any sidelong glances.

According to Mark Twain, all libraries which have not got Jane Austen's books are good libraries, even if they have not got any other books. A dynamic interpretation of this is that all rooms are potential libraries. Another interpretation, less dynamic but currently observed, is that no books are needed in the era of computers. But print-on-demand systems—let alone all the other arguments—demonstrate that they are.

This brings me back to computer systems in native languages. Some of these, like Catalan, German, and Czech, have a number of special letters in their alphabets, sometimes called national characters. In fact, it seems that most written languages have. Nevertheless, the present state of the art in data communications pretends that these signs do not exist. In my native language, and in several others, the letters *ä* and *ö* are quite common. Reading e-mail we have to put up with stand-ins like the signs for «equal to or greater than» \geq and «per mille» ‰, respectively. Such a negligent and short-sighted attitude must be counteracted until rectified. It is no longer a matter of sheer economy or technical limitations. I am sorry to say it looks like the excuse of the unwilling.

By comparison, what is in vogue among those chatting on the Internet is a minor problem. Gimmicks like *cul8r* for *see you later*, *LOL* for *laughing out loud*, and *IMHO* for *in my humble opinion* will come and go as such things do.

What is really distressing is the careless syntax and spelling very often noticed. Tasteless.

Still, there are some bright points in the world of computers. Mainly, I am thinking of visiting-card in your shoes. Ordinary cards are not needed any more. As soon as you shake hands, the relevant information is transferred through your body to a computer in your heel. Our physical capacity is about 100.000 bits per second, which is quite enough for the information contained in a card. The heel computer is driven by the energy released when you walk. On arriving home or at your office you can print out your heel data and see with whom you have shaken hands.

There is another tendency of great consequence that Naisbitt points to: the generation graduating from high school today is the first generation in American history to do so with less knowledge than their parents. In particular, they have problems with English and mathematics, but that is not all.

Recently, Ronald E. Bucknam of Seattle had a telling experience. In response to the demand from the engineering community, he developed a course in engineering practice including, among other things, special in-depth discussions of engineering ethics applied to common day-to-day incidents. It was assumed that students understood the difference between right and wrong as part of their education and upbringing.

Instructors teaching the course at various institutions noted that, unfortunately, this premise was unfounded. Some of the factors pointed out were the deterioration of the family, decreasing focus on religious values, lack of responsibility, over-liberalized education, and increased emphasis on self-gratification. This, it was observed, has led to a situation where distortion in the news media, dubious advertising, unethical practices in business, and the decimation of long-held moral standards have been tacitly accepted by society. As a consequence, a new instructional module on applied ethics had to be developed by the originators of the course.

I think it is time we remind ourselves of an important point made by Joseph Brodsky, the Nobel Laureate: aesthetics is the mother of ethics. The lesson for society is, I should like to say, to provide sense showers at school through increased sessions of reading, writing, drawing, playing, handicraft, sports. My slogan is: sensitivity makes sense.

This programme requires a considerable change in current politics. Culture must be reinstated as a central item. This means I am all for the ideas put forward by the United Nations report «Our Creative Diversity» and the Council of Europe report «In From the Margins». The latter has a twofold aim: to bring

the millions of dispossessed and disadvantaged Europeans in from the margins of society as well as cultural policy in from the margins of governance. Personally, I consider languages basically instrumental in this undertaking, as carriers of information and as media of art.

Ever since C.P. Snow published his essay in the late fifties, in which he warned against what looked like widening gaps between the humanities and the natural sciences, there has been an argument about what number of cultures we have got. In my view, there is just one culture, rich and varied. Consider the creation of a piece of art, which in fact is the establishment of a possible world. A fundamental question is whether such a thing can be an instrument for increasing our knowledge and our understanding of the real world —and, conversely, whether scientific theories and models can be regarded as artistic creations in some sense. I think the answer is yes both cases, reservations always to be made where knowledge is concerned. Anyway, this is yet another indication that there is just one culture.

Whereas opinions and attitudes tend to oscillate, often between extremes, academies can work on a solid basis of common sense. Precious things like gold and silver are products of catastrophes, emanating from the explosion of stars. For precious things like those discussed here no explosion ought to be needed.

Summing up, the main task of academic institutions in the next century is, in my view, to re-establish good taste: in upbringing and education, in research, in language, in literature and the arts, in criticism, in business, in politics, in the media. As far as languages are concerned, this means cultivating them and securing their survival. And all of it presupposes historical insights, i.e. memory.

Academies are pools of experience and, at best, pools of wisdom. These autonomous bodies are needed, I think, more than ever in the present societal environment. Let us join forces in order to disarm a prediction like the one contained in the symphonic remark made by Beethoven's apocryphal servant, when he left his desperate master for a new post: ha ha ha

hah!