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Art Criticism and Its Lingua Franca

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> Language is and has always been a tool of Empire. For a native speaker, English is a resource, a guarantee of universal access to employment in countless places around the globe. Art institutions, universities, colleges, festivals, biennales, publications, and galleries will usually have American and British native speakers on their staff. Clearly, as with any other resource, access needs to be restricted in order to protect and perpetuate privilege. Interns and assistants the world over must be told that their domestic—and most likely public—education simply won't do. (Hito Steyerl)

Paraphrasing Mladen Stilinovic words, one could observe that an art critic who cannot write in English is not an art critic (Stilinovic). However, for the writers and editors the situation is much more challenging and they are expected to write and speak not just any English, it has to be a native-level English. As art criticism operates internationally, the working language is English. The dominance of the English language in the art world is so obvious, that it is like oxygen; no one notices it apart from the non-native speakers who first have to learn the language. To them, it is an additional effort and both a temporal and economic burden. While the Scandinavian countries, for example, are exemplary in that a very good English education is provided via the public education system, globally good English skills still need to be considered a luxury. English, understood as a skill and a social tool, required from anyone from the medical professional to the lawyer to the art critic, often means attending privately paid lessons or language courses. In that sense, language is a matter of social class and money. Very often 'native speaker is a key phrase in job postings for writing and editing positions in the arts. From the legal point of view, article 21 of the 'EU Charter of Fundamental Rights' stipulates language—like sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin —as among the attributes against which it is illegal to discriminate. The

article further states that any discrimination on grounds of nationality is clearly prohibited. Answering question 2002 on the legality of the phrase 'native speaker' in job advertisements, Anna Diamantopoulou, wrote on behalf of the European Commission:

> The Commission is of the opinion that the phrase 'native speaker' is not acceptable, under any circumstances, under Community law. […] However, the Commission recommends using a phrase such as 'perfect or very good knowledge of a particular language' as a condition of access to posts for which a very high level of knowledge of that language is necessary. The Commission will continue to use its powers to fight against any discrimination caused by a requirement for 'native speaker' knowledge in job advertisements. This also applies to its relations with its contractors.

On legal grounds, the use of the term 'native speaker' in a job advert is discriminatory. Most of the jobs in the globalised world require 'perfect or very good knowledge of a particular language', especially English, which is a justifiable requirement. But it is difficult to expect from anyone, that they will change their birth certificate. Art criticism—writing and editing—requires sure a great knowledge of the language, and in this context, particularly, the idea of a *native speaker* seems to be unjust for one more reason: writing and editing is work that requires experience. So-called native speakers (not necessarily of English, but of any language) do not write or edit well just because of the fact that the language they write or edit in is their first language. However, if one thinks about job adverts—especially for editors in art magazines—the word 'native' functions as something in between a skill and ability. Quite recently, in a semi-professional context, I heard an editor admit frankly that at their organisation '[they] prefer native speakers'. Are these subtle practices and suggestions excluding non-native English speakers from writing and editing positions discriminatory? Linguistic capital is clearly a way to impose and maintain a power that is not only symbolic but also economic and political. In this case, a *habitus* of writing English in a certain way is adapted as English is the lingua franca of the global

art market. As Pierre Bourdieu points out:

> Language is a particularly effective mechanism for maintaining distinctions among social classes because it functions both to communicate and signal identity, with one function frequently disguised as the other. (28)

When talking about the language of the art world, 'social class' has a double meaning. The fact that people from Spain, France, the Ukraine, or Brazil have to know a certain native-like level of English in order to get access to the job market seems unfair especially when one compares different levels of social mobility. Upper middle-class individuals from non-English-speaking countries have more access to language education than their colleagues from different social and economical backgrounds. While Bourdieu refers mostly native languages and the distinctions it produces between social classes (via use of vocabulary, grammar structure, use of colloquialism and cultural references, etc.) in the context of art criticism, this issue returns in a different manifestation: non-English art writers, regardless of their class background, need to know the English spoken in the art world, which as a matter of class privilege is highly specialised, complex, and exclusionary. Ironically enough, being a 'native' functions as skill and ability, which is to the detriment of non-native English speaker as well as English speakers from lower class backgrounds. When English native speakers go to Spain, France, the Ukraine, or Brazil, they will have more job opportunities in art writing than their local counterparts. The dominance of the English language is therefore both arbitrary and unjustified.

I have personally experienced the way in which the privilege of the native speaker manifests. In order to fund my living costs during my PhD studies, I not only worked on research and teaching at my university, I also held a full-time position in an outsourced call-centre of a French cooperation in Poland. My job was to pick up phone-calls with a 'smile in my voice' and say, 'Bonjour, C'est Sophie du SVP. Comment

est-ce que je peux vous aider?'[1] and aid customers in solving their IT issues. All of the people working there—except one—were graduates of French philology but not native French speakers. French clients who were calling knew very well that the help desk was not situated in France, and had precast assumptions of our ability to speak French. I remember my French colleague, who was usually very patient, putting a caller on loudspeaker, and we heard outraged screaming from the other side of the line. The callers yelled, 'You don't understand what I'm saying, I want somebody who can speak French!'. My colleague calmly replied in impeccable French: 'Dear Sir, you are speaking to the French person'. This situation was funny but it also shows that only the native French colleague could have dealt with the customer in this way. Others would have had to endure the shouting much more subserviently. The privilege of 'native-language' shone through clearly that day. It didn't matter how well I or any of my colleagues knew the language. The incident had not been about language skill, but about discrimination based on an assumption of non-nativeness.

Understanding this condition of language privilege might threaten some as it may easily be seen as a devaluation of one's success. Especially to those who have worked hard to achieve the status of quasi-native speaker, highlighting this imbalance might seem a challenge to their personal achievements. At this point, some might suddenly feel the urge to defend their privilege (of either being a native speaker or having the resources to invest in one's language development to achieve quasi-native levels) thereby further strengthening the very hegemony, which is at stake here (Blanchet 71). However, acknowledging the privilege of being a native speaker does not mean denying one's individual achievements. It is merely an act of understanding that financial, social and cultural capital has the structural and logical effect of rendering certain relations and positions 'natural'. To recognize the privilege of language is to become aware of the structures and systems that lead to linguistic homogenization in the art world and continue to exclude

1 'Hello, this is Sophie from SVP. How can I help you?'

social actors based on their individual class positions and backgrounds.

There are also those that profit from this linguistic homogenisation and the hegemony of a single language, English, in the art world and beyond. English as a commodifiable skill is part of the neoliberal and capitalist world: language certificates are entry tickets into the universities around the world, but completing a university degree in the English language still does not make one a 'native'. There are ways for a non-native English speaker to attain a native-like status. But as Steyerl notes, that that, too, is a question of financial ability.

> The only way to shake off the shackles of your insufferable foreign origins is to attend Columbia or Cornell, where you might learn to speak impeccable English—untainted by any foreign accent or non-native syntax. And after a couple of graduate programs where you pay $34,740 annually for tuition, you just might be able to find yet another internship.

Good luck to those who want to try! Steyerl's ironic suggestion comes from her essay 'International Disco Latin', which is a satirical response to Alix Rule and David Levine's essay 'International Art English'. In this essay the authors analysed the press releases sent by museums and galleries from all over the world and mercilessly criticized and mocked the language employed there. Commenting on the haphazard semantics, the often obscure vocabulary, or the incorrect grammar, they coin the term 'International Art English', which describes a decidedly amateurish English in stark contrast to the 'correct' British national corpus. Steyerl's 'International Disco Latin' reveals the privilege connected to such semiotic pedantry and highlights the precarious working conditions in the art world. She draws attention to the fact that press releases are usually written by overworked and under-paid (if paid at all) employees or interns. 'International Art English' was meant as an ironic comment, but it disregards these global power dynamics. As Steyerl points out in 'International Disco Latin':

> The art world (if such a thing even exists) harbors a long tradition of terrific self-serving sarcasm. But satire as one of the traditional tools of enlightenment is not only defined by making fun. It gains its punch from *who* is being made fun of. But Voltairean satire is mostly too risky. We are indeed lacking authors attacking or even describing, in any language, the art world's jargon-veiled money laundering and post-democratic Ponzi schemes.

Steyerl's essay, exposes the mockery of those with lesser means as a mechanism of class warfare: 'International Art English' is designed to separate those who are 'in' on the joke form those who are not. It seeds out those who are perceived to be rightly belonging to 'the establishment'. Laughing *at* instead of *with* becomes a symptom of discrimination.

Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* echoes this sentiment. Eribon is a French sociologist and philosopher, raised as a working-class boy in a family that lived in provincial public-housing estates, where everyone left school as soon as possible and worked in manufacturing jobs. He was able to pursue his education due to his mother's willingness to take on an additional job and his night job as a porter. Written after Eribon's return to his hometown following his father's death, *Returning to Reims* evokes the working-class world of Eribon's childhood. It mixes intimate and touching personal stories with a sociological reflection on class identity and the social reproduction of privilege. He notes that often people living in the social and geographical periphery feel neither excluded from nor deprived of various social goods because, they have no means of gaging what constitutes the norm for those in the centre of society. This, he argues, makes it even more difficult for them to understand the extent to which they are being discriminated against (cf. 52). 'International Art English', one might argue, follows a similar pattern in that it preys on the ignorance of those whose first language is not English, and who, being at the periphery cannot possible gauge the level of their ignorance, which becomes the basis of Rule's and Levine's joke.

Eribon's decision to include his personal stories and reflections is rare in the academic and artistic outputs. Perhaps this is because those with such experiences succeed less often or because they fear of discrimination when telling their stories publicly. The fear of ridicule and contempt is very present. In her portrait for *The Guardian* journalist, Kim Willsher, perfectly captures Eribon's experience:

> [The contempt] is everywhere, almost conditioned, always a bit pejorative, demeaning, contemptuous or mocking. Even if it's not violent, there's a superiority. I feel attacked by this. When people speak this way about the concierge, that's my grandmother; or the factory worker, that's my grandfather; and the cleaner, my mother. […] People who say they are proud to be working-class are really saying they are proud to no longer be working-class. I escaped my background but I was still ashamed to admit it or make reference to it. I was ashamed of my family, of their habits, even of the way my mother pronounced words.

Maybe such personal stories are rare in the art or academic world because the only justification for these stories is when they can be told from the position of success? Then, they become acceptable. But how many of those stories are not told? How many are not listened to? How many will never have a chance to be told from the perspective of success?

Art and the Linguistic Periphery

> The social world, is of the order of belief, perception and appreciation, knowledge and recognition-name, renown, prestige, honor, glory, authority everything which constitutes symbolic power as a recognized power-always concern the 'distinguished' possessors and the 'pretentious' challengers. (Bourdieu 251)

What is important to emphasize in regards to the art world and art criticism is that 'success' is predicated on cultural and social capital, meaning the ability to effectively network with those already on the inside of the system (Prieur and Savage 566-80). People usually meet

and socialize with people of a similar social standing, which can become an obstacle to those perceived to be from the 'wrong background' in the art world especially, as the blurring of private and professional is particularly common here. Events such as openings, meetings, talks, previews of biennales, art picnics, or gatherings are where these connections occur giving an advantage to those, who are already used to such events from their personal lives or upbringings. The importance and power of these events rests on the simple fact that, they are not a formal, and thus reproduce existing (private) networks under the guise of professional contacts. The art world functions in between the fluid borders of what might be called a network and a community.

The reality of networking makes the notion of the periphery and the centre even more precarious as is not only true geographically, where there are 'centres' around which the art world –and by extensions its critic –gather, it is also true in terms of the periphery of the English language, which makes it harder for those at the outside to make their voices heard and welcomed on the inside. English as the *lingua franca* of the art world adds to existing forms of discrimination and acts as an international gatekeeper for those from lower social backgrounds globally. The question 'who can afford to be an art critic?' then becomes not only one of specialised knowledge, higher education, and an interesting perspective, but crucially it is also dependent on the financial means to speak as 'native' as possible.

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