

,West meets East and East meets West'¹

Language is homeland – The challenge to find a common language

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Abstract:

The language we are born into and we grow up in - no matter in which country and culture - is our first language (mother tongue). Our earliest experiences in and with this world are formed through its sound, rhythm and intermission, in short through the musicality of our mother tongue. The way we witness and understand the inner and outer world is crucially influenced by it. Because of this, we know how important it is to find a common language in our psychoanalytical work. This also counts for our cooperative exchange in our psychoanalytic community, especially if we come from different linguistic areas with their various traditions and cultural backgrounds. From here on, diverse questions evolve on how we can find a common language in the East-West-Dialog, develop and use it.

Dear colleagues,

an aspiration of painting, especially of expressionism and abstract painting was and is, to make unseen things visible through the application and composition of paint. What lies behind the things that catch the observer's eye? What can be discovered in the diversity of different colours and layers of paint? Which colours trigger which kind of affects? And how do we form them into pictures inside of us?

Likewise, we try to find a way in our psychoanalytical work, to be able to say what was inexpressible up to this point – in the ‚here and now‘ of the session. Anna O., a patient of Josef Breuer named it 'talking cure'. It is about articulating what was not allowed to appear up until then; especially through designating contradictions and conflictual situations, in order to adress oneself to it and to understand it.

Sigmund Freud writes:

„Nothing takes place in a psycho-analytic treatment but an interchange of words between the patient and the analyst ...“ and: „Thus we shall not depreciate the use of words in psychotherapy and we shall be pleased if we can listen to the words that pass between the analyst and his patient.“ (S. Freud, Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (SE, 1916-17[1915-17], p.15-16)

¹ EPF Conference 2017 in Hague 'The Familiar and the Unfamiliar'

It is a big step, when a patient starts to hear himself, meaning that he is able to listen. Only then he becomes the chance to piece together what was incomprehensible up to this point, to associate, which means to think and even more: to think further. But his talking and hearing is shaped and modelled by early experiences in the relationship to the primary object.

The sound of the voice, its measure, its rhythm, its breaks, its tempo, its volume, tout short the tone, which, through its diverse nuances and its unique timbre, creates the melody, the music of speaking and – literally – not only makes it heard but also *brings it to our hearing*. But we also know that a lot can get lost between the spoken and the heard word.

We attribute an essential aspect, the fact that what is said really 'arrives', to the importance of the voice – simply: the tone. How the saying so aptly describes: 'the tone makes the music'. Even though we ask ourselves: How do we find this tone, respectively pitch it? A patient of mine told me after many years, close to the end of her psychoanalysis: „*I often did not listen to **what** you were saying at the beginning of my therapy and also recurrently during the sessions. I just was not able to. I simply heard, **how** you said it.*“

The parents of this patient had different cultural backgrounds and spoke different languages. They could hardly communicate with each other at the beginning of their relationship. So the patient grew up bilingual indeed, but was often very confused and bothered with the question: what is my mothertongue and what means the language of my father to me. This disorientation was also connected with highly charged temper and emotions, coming from both parents and their families. To not to be confronted with such confusing experiences or to avoid them, another patient told me: „*the best language for me would be maths. It is spoken all over the world. The rules are given, clear and precise. There are no misunderstandings in this language.*“

Further on it becomes clear, how much the patient suffers when being misinterpreted by communicating with others, especially in close relationships. Her voice is childlike high, often even squeaky. Her background in an as dominant experienced relationship

to the mother, where she did not feel meant and even more did not feel heard after all, led to the perception not to be able to express herself verbally, not to be understood.

When I started more than 20 years ago, to teach and also give advice and support to candidates in East Europe during their psychoanalytical education, I often depended on a translation and still do. Since the English language was only taught partially and could not be learned by then in East Europe, there were only a few colleagues that were able to recite and exchange views in English, let alone in German.

The clinical material also had to be registered in the particular national language in the followed up discussion and shared reflection. What does that mean? It means, that first of all I was and still I am depending on the support, the help, in particular on the help of a translator, if I want to contribute to this teaching and learning process. I needed someone, who was able to express what I could not communicate and still can not because it is a language I am completely unfamiliar with. On the way between the said and the heard, we have to take a further step and accept another challenge, in particular the translation of one language into the respectively foreign language. This way I was and still I am in the position of someone that needs support if I generally want to assimilate in a nuanced way, if I want to comprehend it understandingly. This is an existential basic experience that we all know, especially then, when we want to get in touch and in a dialogue with our inner landscapes and their distortions. No less than when we get confronted with the hardship and suffering of our patients in the analytical room. Resistance and different defensive formations are well known in this context. Those, so my experience shows, manifest in the acquisition of a collectively used foreign language, the English language. The reasons to learn or to refuse to learn this language may arise from different sources. But in my estimation there is one key aspect for all of us: it is the confrontation, the experience with the unfamiliar.

To venture into completely unknown territory – no matter how curious and open we are - is always connected with loss. With that emerge feelings of uncertainty, helplessness, powerlessness, anger and envy, shame and guilt, but especially the feeling of being in need, when we travel into unfamiliar linguistic regions. So it is the loss of our linguistic home, our inner language, also of our intimate dialogue, that we

sustain painful thereby.

To give up our mothertongue, which fundamentally belongs to us, which is our very own (,das Ur-Eigene’) and is substantial to create and build up our identity and to win into an unfamiliar speech field, remains a risk. But only when we take this risk, in interplay of the 'familiar and unfamiliar' (which is also the subject of our conference), we give ourselves the chance to discover new things and to learn. We can share this situation, when we are willing to break loose from our familiar speech field, to learn the English language for example and use it as a tool for our cooperative exchange and to profit from it together. *To do this step of separation, applies to all of us equally.* In doing so, we can understand acquiring a foreign language as a deliberate and intentional step into a form of ,*emigration*’, which is connected to the joy of always being able 'come back home', into our own linguistic world. We all know this relief from encounters in a foreign country, when we – and even just briefly – hear our own language, our mothertongue or are able to communicate in it.

If we risk this step of separation – from the 'familiar to the unfamiliar' - and support each other during this process, we are able to deepen and develop our psychoanalytical education, our thinking and interpreting in the clinical setting as well as our collegial collaboration in our globalised world.