author collective (1973)

Autonomy of the Working Class and Language Confusion. Your language, my language, our language?

[38]

Preliminary note

This text was written in January 1973. It was planned as an internal discussion paper for us.

Who are we?

- We are emigrants in Frankfurt, who do housing (rent) strikes and squat, who participate in demonstrations. It was us who articulated the need to learn the german language.
- We are comrades, german and foreign, who at the beginning did or wanted to do language classes with emigrants. We wanted to offer ourselves for learning the german language, to change the language competences and therefore also the political consciousness of the emigrants.
- We are at the same time the emigrants who boycotted this attempt. We resisted this pedagogy, although it presented itself as revolutionary. We wanted to be autonomous also in our learning.
- All of us, after these initial experiences, have reflected on the questions: what does school mean for us, and what could autonomous learning mean? How can we enter a relation that makes us no longer Germans and emigrants, and no longer "comrades" and "proletarians"?

What do we want to learn from each other?
How do we want to change ourselves mutually?
What do we want to achieve together?

If you are now reading this paper, you won't find a clear answer to these questions. If you expect clear answers to these problems, you should question you desire for clarity.

"The avantgardes come to us, the proletarians, and say exactly what we would say and cannot say. They speak in our name. They win our trust. And without us noting it, they start speaking in their name and not in ours, but they have our trust…But already in the beginning, when they were still speaking in our name, there was something wrong: it was them who were speaking and not us"

That's the opinion of Vincenco, "guest"worker at Opel.

If you, reading this, can see beforehand that these words express ex negative what a programme for an autonomous proletarian culture should be; if you can, principally, deduce from these words such a programme and the techniques necessary for its realization – then what follows has no meaning for you: go to the proletarians, and … good luck. But if you, the same as us who are writing here, have to travel a long way intellectually to reach clarity, then these pages – that report the history of some of our mistakes – may help you to avoid some of them.

Report and critical review

[Description of the aspirations to do language classes, and the search for appropriate teaching materials and methods. Schulz Griesbach, the most common didactic material at the time in Germany, is criticised for not representing the learner's everyday life, because its protagonists are students and engineers, but never workers. The Berlitz method is more technical, and employs different media. Its focus are structural excercises in the form of dialogue. These are criticised as a tacit teaching of the ideology inherent in the material, a "conditioning", because the students have to "take initiative" in an exactly predefined way, with the predefined contents. They also looked at a manual by the Goethe institute made specifically for work migrants, "Il Tedesco per chi lavora". Although this method is much closer to the workers' reality, it ideologically the more problematic. "The learning of the german language is subordinated to the use-value of the method, which is to integrate the worker into german capitalist society" [39]. This integration happens through "the persistent and continually repeated representation of a model, which is the 'perfect worker who accepts everything', including his own exploitation" [40].

Through studying experiences in France, they came across the "method of Conscientisação used by Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire"[41].]

[41]

"'Conscientisação' means, therefore, getting beyond a level of spontaneous interpretation of reality to a critical level, on which reality becomes a recognizable object, and the human takes a quasi scientific position. 'Conscientisação' is not 'facing reality' and taking a false intellectual stance. There can be no 'Conscientisação' outside of praxis, it only exists in a process of action/reflection." (P. Freire: Conscientisation – INODEP, Paris 1971, S. 20 f.)

[Detailed description of Freire's approach in alphabetisation, focussing on the preliminary study of the existential themes in the location, the process of interpretation and codification, the participatory elements in this process, and the method of alphabetization in the cultural circles]

[43]

The misrelation you might note here between the methodological effort and practical examples is found in Freire's publications, and not a result of a curtailed representation of the authors.

[They identify three kinds of application of Freire's methods in France. a)alphabetisation as "participation": Freire's method is used to make courses more "lively" and "effective", but taking out the political implications. It is an "integration and exploitation" of Freire, using his method for the same goals as in traditional courses. b) alphabetisation as conscientisation: they find this in the French group "Le Paria", as a result of reflecting on the pitfalls of just taking Freire's method. They attempt to contribute to workers' consciousness of the mechanisms of exploitation, and analyse their day to day situations. The authors criticize that these courses often lack efficiency for learning outcomes. c) courses that understand themselves as revolutionary. These groups want to contribute to language learning and conscientisation to enable workers to actively participate in class struggle. They highlight the

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We already had a certain idea of the "guest workers". We therefore started our research with a fundamental theme, that we used as a code in our analysis. This fundamental theme in our case was "German". In the course of our research we visited guest workers in the different striking houses and in the workers' residences of VDM and Opel. The study consisted of the following questions:

1. How long have you been here?

2. Do you have contact with Germans? Where?

3. In which situations would you have wished to speak better german? Narrate!

4. How did you learn the german you know?

The results of this inquiry could be split in three areas:

1. A list of situations, in which the "guest workers" saw the need …to speak german.

2. A series of stories that represented their experience with Germans and the german language.

3. The reasons why they wanted or didn't want to learn German (more or less explicit)

We noted, that the stories the "guestworkers" told represented "frontier situations" for them. The narrations themselves were codifications and it was enough to represent them in images, to be able for a working group to decode them. At our first encounter, with 30 "guest workers" attending, we took up a story that two of them had told us in the course of the research:

One day, they reported, they were riding on the tramway. The ticket officer comes, they don't have a ticket, to which follows the attempt of a discussion with the ticket officer. The graphic depiction of this story (the interior of a tramway, the passengers, the ticket officer) is already a codification. By treating others stories in the same way we could assemble a basic material to start the lessons. What remains is the problem of decodification, meaning how the guest workers related to these codifications and their discussion.

We thought, the explicit goal being to learn German, that the decodification and the discussion should take place in german or at least needed to be conceptualized in a way that allowed for learning german. But as this was the main difficulty, we tried different strategies:

1st technique

a) the teacher first translated the story that one or several of the learners had told into german. At the same time, the students could see a series of images as a visual representation of the story.

b) With the help of a game of questions and answers, led by the teacher, structures and relevant vocabulary that appeared in the german version of the story were identified and appropriated.

[46]

2nd technique

a) and b) like before. We added 3 additional steps:

c) the students express what they would have liked to say in the situation discussed.

d) translation of this into german

e) again, game of question and answers like in b). With this technique, students took on the roles of persons who intervened in the situation. The teacher said in german only what students could not express. In the game of questions and answers, the teacher always addressed his questions to a particular student, or one student asked another. We had problems from the beginning on with this fact. We had started to emply the game of questions and answers to facilitate an active use of the structures and the vocabulary.

The "guest workers" were inhibited when they were asked to answer to a question addressed individually to them. In contrast, they answered in choir, spontaneously and apparently enjoying themselves. We believed to understand the reason, that when they should answer individually, they saw themselves exposed to judgement, or even in a situation of competition with the others. That is where the inhibition came from, almost a fear: was it the memory of the failures they had passed every time they were exposed to a situation of individual competition? By contrast, repeating and answering in choir gave them a strong security: they seemed to experience a feeling of solidarity.

So they started to repeat in choir all answers and the phrases they liked most. The collectively repeated phrases had, from the beginning, a very recognizable rhythm. We asked ourselves if rhythm might play an important role in their memory capacity.

We tried to verify this hypothesis using matching songs and images, following a model the "guest workers had recommended themselves: the cantastorie siciliani; this connected also to a german tradition, the one of the "Moritat" (street ballad).

3rd technique

a) we took a german song that described a situation known to the "guest workers" and was suitable for a representation following the model of the cantastorie. As first song, we used "Tonio Schiavo" by Franz-Joseph Degenhardt.

b) we represented the story on a series of cardbords with different scenes

c) a german comrade sang the song from the beginning to the end

d) then we sang it all verse by verse

e) for each verse, the unknown words were explained, until everybody had understood the meaning of each word

f) we sang the song together until we knew it

g) discussion of the content of the song

The results we had made us belief that we could verify our hypothesis. All three techniques can be expanded for the use of alphabetisation. it does not need more than writing the key words that appear in the discussion, on the blackbord: with these words, reading and writing are tought.

More and more we realized that huge gaps and shortaged remain.

Most of all, students resisted to do anything but collectively recite phrases. For everything else, they were too distracted, they denied answering, they rejected systematically all structural exercises (Questions and answers after model sentences, variations over a pattern, etc.). Although all problems that we treated in class were always part of the immediaty reality of the "guest workers", they remained uninvolved in the moment that they recognized that this served an instrumental purpose to learn the german language, or they disturbed the game constantly.

In all that there was one point that in our view was positive, although its consequences were extremely chaotic: it was that the "guest workers" had a cunning joy asking questions in all possible directions, changing the topic every time according to what came to their mind and how they liked. This brough us to question our technique: we had to revise the impact of our game of questions and answers, and the whole structure of our course.

> *[They return to "parler, lire, etc. (PVLEV), the French course that had inspired them, noting that the material of this course consists of two books for the teacher, whole the worker only has an exercise book with predefined examples. The information is therefore unidirectional.]*

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This does not comply at all to the goals that Freire exposes and that "PVLEV" accepts, that is, that the relation teacher-student should be founded on dialogue, implying, one could think, that it is a mutual one, except if this dialogue does not imply necessarily mutuality. Based on the implicit critique of the workers, expressed in their behaviour throughout the course, we believed that we could, and must, criticise this scheme. [...]

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Must not we ask the same question as Jomard de Brito listening to a peasant: "What can one offer to an adult person who states: 'The world is my school'? Taking this questions seriously, you arrive at the following:

1. The initiative – not of teaching, but of learning – is and should be of the one who learns.

2. The one who attempts to teach another one who is already learning by himself, is and shall remain part of the world from which the other learns, he is an element of this world.

3. Nobody else than the workers themselves have the right to determine, in which direction and how they should learn.

These are sufficient criteria to question fundamentally the techniques we had employed up to this moment. The fundamental part of these techniques has to be seen in the game of questions and answers; in this game of the teacher he formulated, through asking questions, both the codified situation as a problem, and the answers of the students, trying to get them to a solution of the

problem. A reversal of roles in this game of questions and answers means that from now on the questions systematically had to come from the learners ('learners' and not 'students' anymore); the answers needed to come from those who knew something about it, which does not mean that these are always the same persons; it can as well be another 'learner'. This way, through a series of questions by the 'learners', they could get to learn what they wanted to know about a particular topic, in the direction and to the extent that they wanted. In the practical realization of this technique obviously there were a series of problems. The first one consisted in how the learners could get to take the initiative in a language that was not theirs and of which they knew, according to a general assessment, relatively little.

> *[further problems for the approach: how can learners pose their own questions and raise their consciousness; and how can this method be systematized so it does not only lead to confusion but constructive work]*

The first problem was relatively easy to solve. All "guest workers" who have spent some time in Germany are able to pose a series of basic questions, like "What is this?, "What does … mean?", How do you say….!?", "What is the word of ….?", etc. The 'learners' can use these well from the start confronted with a codification that contains parts with unknown german verbalization. The answer of the one who, by chance, is the "knower" is understood as long as the image is clear that gave rise to the question. The others, who do not yet know the structures contained in question and answer, […] can understand because they know what the question is about. so they can themselves ask a question, or even give a further answer, using the structure and possibly the vocabulary of the answer given before, if they do not like this answer.

[49]

The "coordinator" can have the function to pay attention that not the same people are speaking all the time, so that all can participate actively in the exchange […] "Coordinator" and "knower" in this moment do not have to be the same person, also the "learners" can take over these functions. […]

It was easy to recognize, that each question following to a proposition by someone else, and even every counterproposition, usually introduced with a "but" – the most used conjunction amongst "guest workers", together with "Ma come?" and "che cazzo dici?" – represented the "problematization" of the topic that was introduced before. But we also recognized that this remained unconscious, and tended to stay within a cliché scheme, the problematic was hardly ever renewed. […]

We therefore organised a discussion on the topic: "questions and answers: their function". There was no need for maieutics to make the workers understand the role that questions play in geeting deeper in a problem; moreover, they noted the fact that the one posing the questions in reality expresses his own problem: he leads the discussion in the sense and direction he wants. From there they exposed the whole ambivalence of the socratic concept of dialogue (that Freire keeps up: this is the point where our ideological critique of Freire's methods, see below). The result of the discussion was the insight, that "who poses the questions is the master of the situation". There was no lack of proof for this thesis. It is sufficient to look at what the police does: questions and interrogations; then what forms of public authorities are: endless series of questions; and then what bosses in companies do at interviews or landlords for renting a flat; the "masters" in the factory if you don0t

comply or the machine is broken: questions, questions and more questions. From this conclusion action was immediate: "*We* ask the questions: never answer, reply to each question with a counterquestion". There was the reversal of the situation and of the principle: "if the 'master' asks the questions, then asking questions, and knowing and being able to ask questions, makes you a master". The conscientisation was so huge that everytime we made the mistake to ask a question in the following time (about trifles) we immediately received the response: "first of all, who is asking the questions here? (formulated as a question!).

Still, the problem remained how to practice this in a language the "guest workers" should learn and by definition do not know. We found the following solution: A situation is depicted in an image. One of the learners starts to ask a question about it. The one who by chance knows about it answers. The answer had to be formulated as a question again, using the interrogative structures already known. In this way, it gets back to the one who had answered, or to someone else. A new answer is given, and is again reformulated as a question. [...]

[further elaboration on the questioning method]

[51]

The third problem, how to systematise this kind of learning, remains to be solved. But we are pretty clear already now that a systematization of the whole process from the beginning, for example in the form of a working plan, is to be excluded, as well as a "rigorous progression of the steps". [...] Systematization won0t be something to be done preliminarily, but a continuous work.

[...]

Thanks to our experimental test of his method, now we can assess his [Freire's] real consciousness. Freire starts the exposé of his theory with two stunning principles, against which at first there can be no opposition:

S. 60: "Trust in the people is the unalienable precondition for revolutionary change"

S. 51: "In fighting for their salvation the oppressed must be their own role model"

[...]

[52]

The guest workers have without hesitation and very explicitly exposed the power of manipulation that is given to the one who asks the questions, that leads the "dialogue". [...] If one reclaims the initiative in the process of learning, as well as control, this means rejecting the notion of "participation". It is not about participating but about being autonomous. [...]

If you speak of 'Conscientisação', of "making conscious", this means speaking of someone who *makes* conscious ("conscientiseur") and someone who is made conscious ("conscientisé"); that is, everything related to consciousness is occupied by the pedagogue. "Give me your consciousness and I will trust in you", Freire seems to say. This is ped-agogy par excellence. [...]

We only have to recall how Freire's method is used by the current ultra-reactionary government in Brazil; a government that realised immediately how this method of "dialogue", "participation", "trust" and 'Conscientisação' can be of use. […]

The "trust" that elites have in the people never was any problem; it results from their centuries-old experience in possibilities of manipulation. The real problem is the trust that the lower classes have in their momentary leaders. To return to our situation: the problem is not whether the pedagogue has trust in the people or not; he has this trust anyway, although on different levels and for different reasons. We would need to reverse Freire's sentence and say, that "the mistrust of the people towards everybody who offers himself as their servant is the unalienable precondition for revolutionary change". […]

[53]

The idea of "making conscious" ('Conscientisação') in relation to autonomy, needs to be replaced by the idea of autonomy in the process of becoming conscious ("prise de conscience"). […]

S. 85 [Freire] "The teacher-learner presents the material for reflection to the learner-teachers…" What is used here, is the motif of the mirror, as old as metaphysics. Like a mirror the teacher presents to the student his own image: this allows for re-flexion. The mirror reflects the image. The teacher reflects the student's image. What is not said, is that if it is the mirror which reflects, transferring the metaphor it is the teacher who reflects, and not the student. In effect it is the teacher who takes on the role of the mirror. The student only reflects mediated by the teacher: he observes himself in the mirror; he assists to the reflection. And again, he is only public and not actor, as Freire claims.

With this deformation inherent to the Freirean method one can explain why one of his leitmotifs is the constant search for neutrality in relation to the students[1]. His major preoccupation is to avoid a distortion in the mirror: the teacher is obliged to be neutral, anonymous, one could even say "castrated". This is a noble endeavour, but it reveals the complete dependence of the method on the ethics of the teacher. […]

[On the preliminary research]

In Freire, this is all easy and very modern: a team of specialists works out everything in interdisciplinary collaboration: contents, vocabulary, material, structure of the classes, form of relationship to the students, etc. Of course, it is indispensable that "representatives" of the future students "take part": voilá, the students become voyeurs, but don't worry, not all of them, only the representatives. Through the analysis meetings one brings about "dialogically" the totality that is presented to the students (123-141, see above). A strange kind if dialogue, that does not take place between teacher and students anymore, but between specialists. Freire and his specialists decide that the codifications and the problems posed are their private issue.

In fact, the milieu in which the students live is seen as a whole and living code that needs to be deciphered (S. 123-141). It is deciphered to produce a new code which the students have the task to

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[1] Comment N.L. : interesting misreading….

decipher. The specialists decide that the students are capable of decoding this second code produced by the specialists, but that they are not able

[54]

to decipher the first code they are confronted with all the time. It does not occur to them that the narrations of the workers are already a kind of deciphering and recoding of reality. It does not occur to them to look at what workers say and to question whether not every narration contains a problematization of reality. We can hardly believe that Freire did not notice this. We rather believe that also he recognized that the fundamental thing is the first decodification, and that the second one is only a post festum rumination of something others have done before. it is exactly for this reason that the "conscientiseur" (the "conscious-maker") in himself could not leave this task to the initiative of the workers: the ped-agogue must lead.

[…]

The reversal of the Freirean principles now allows to pose basic principles of an autonomous proletarian learning method:

1. Autonomy already in "becoming conscious" and not in "making conscious" ('Conscientisação') in relation to autonomy.

2: The trust of the oppressed in themselves and only in themselves is the unalienable precondition for revolutionary change.

3. In the struggle for their liberation the oppressed must choose themselves for a role model.

[…]

Lastly, the [desired] situation is founded neither on dialogue nor on exchange, but on the "creation of commonality": Commonality in the experiences, by a method which unites the experiences that are often made individually in the learning process; creation of commonality of critique and the propositions that everyone makes; and finally the creation of commonality in the tools and media that are deemed relevant for the application of the method, so everybody can use them. […]

> *[further explanation on how this form of learning should be grounded in everyday experience]*

[55]

The different narrations of experiences can be documented in a way that they are accessible to everyone and can become an object of common debate. This can be done through theatrical play, eventually recorded on video, to make it reproducible and the players have the possibility to view themselves. Or through photographs, drawings, audio recording, or writing the narrations on the blackboard. The documentation is in itself an important part of the learning process, because one gets accustomed to analysing a situation and defining the relevant moments; at the same time, learners get used to analyse media of communication and expression: theatre, photography, drawing, recording, writing, etc., and learn their possible uses and the technical skill to employ them; this, by the way, will be the best foundation to study mass media and the possibility of their

"misuse". [...] Working on tools for communication and expression will be central moment in the creation of commonality.

[...]

In every step proposals can be made for group work that allows for all participants to actively intervene and control the ongoing processes. One could try employing methods developed by the Surrealists, especially automatic writing and games that build on this concept. One knows how the method of producing inspirations, known in the USA with the name "brainstorming", has been exploited. [...] [56] But this does not mean that it is the only possible form of application, but we can use for revolutionary purposes a method which in its creation was also revolutionary. The principle of this technique is to first collect propositions for solutions of a problem and then proceed to analyse the proposals.

> *[They describe a form of discussion for which a learner poses a problem and everyone brings in occurrences without criteria for their value, afterwards they are ordered and discussed]*

The experience of the surrealists shows that occurences that initially seem strange contain brilliant solutions, because often they bring unconscious elements to the surface.

> *[conclusion for the creation of learning situations]*

The political motivation comes from the "guest workers" themselves: "to speak with guest workers of other countries, to explain our reasons to the Germans, to explain to them the reasons for our political activities, to call them to joint political struggle with us". These are the most commonly heard speeches. They make clearly visible that there is no convincing reason for them to attend a german course. This is to say, that there are much more pressing activities for them, for which again they need other supplementary ones (They make a strike on housing rents and therefore want to talk to the germans to convince them to make a strike as well). They want the tools to communicate on a level with the germans which they themselves choose. No more. An action like a rent strike is part of a political and private behaviour that has as a foundation the resistance to emigration, the resistance to work in Germany and the resistance to any integration. It would mean to ask guest workers for a schizophrenic behaviour if they needed to first integrate in the german culture, and learning the german language equals that in their eyes (if one considers the intellectual efforts necessary for that), the language of the "masters" or the written language, to communicate with the germans, a thing that is necessary for joint struggle. For these reasons, and on the basis of the teaching experiments that we have made in the past months we have reached the conclusion that any form of german lessons do not address the real problem.

Instead, we have to create situations that allow guest workers to appropriate the necessary tools that they need for their struggle , to an extent which is defined through the necessities of this struggle in itself, respectively the need felt by the guest workers. Only in this sense the possibility remains open that they intervene as a creative element of an autonomous proletarian culture in Germany, which is something completely different than integration of the working emigrants on the lowest level.

We believe that the establishment of a multinational culture in Germany has real chances. We even believe it to be a precondition for the multinational class struggle. We don't believe anymore in the

old international scheme, that poses that the struggle first takes place in the individual national units and then follows their connection […] Class struggle in Germany will be multinational or it will not succeed. A multinational class struggle can not be imagined without fostering an autonomous proletarian consciousness during this struggle, which is both its support and its content. The expression of this consciousness will be an autonomous proletarian culture, based on a multinational proletarian language. When the multinational proletarian language develops, necessarily it will form a basic linguistic repertoire which is common to the languages of proletarians of different countries. One should analyse the role guest workers play in simplifying the language of intellectuals, transforming the language of intellectuals into a language of the everyday, and enriching it by new expressions […]

A guest worker said commenting on the photo [showing a house demolished by an earthquake or a fire]: "This is a house demolita". Another example: "My watch anticipa".

This is the reason why these language mistakes should never be corrected. A golden rule for a "coordinator" and for "teachers" is: If a guest worker "makes a mistake", the "teacher" can only correct it if he has understood. This means the communication worked. [58] The correction does not contribute to the communication, it is a mere correction. All corrections are oppressive and an expression of class. The speaker should correct himself, he is the one who should notice if he could not make himself understood. The same is true for mistakes in pronounciation.[…]

What we think about a multinational proletarian language is not significant. What would be much more important is to let proletarians ("guest workers" and germans" develop their own language according to their needs and capacities.

The critique of PVLEV can now be substantially extended: They do not question in any way the teaching of correct French. The problem for PVLEV consists in whether the worker immigrant should be integrated into the capitalist system or into the struggling French proletariat. This condition – integration and frenchization – is never questioned and seems completely obvious.

Leaving the initiative and control if the learning process to the hands of the learners, the method described here allows the guest workers in every moment to decide on the direction of the learning process. […] The method wants to be understood as a contribution to the communist revolution of the communality (mise en commun) of isolated knowledges. The proletarians have nothing to loose except their scattered knowledges, their own culture is only to be built!

Afterword

"The world is beautiful, but nobody is master. Our natural life is beautiful. And it belongs to all…as do the sacrifices, the wounds, the pains and the weight. So shall we study and work together? We emigrants for a long time have thought of creating an international center where one can meet, and talk about the things happening in the world. To get to know each other, exchange thoughts, have fun, if possible everybody together without distinctions of nationality or skin colour. That's what we thought! The fact is that racism-capitalism today separates us. To accomplish this, we need general sense, good will and the sacrifice of all. We hope our concern finds the sympathy of all those who fight for a more just world, because we do not want to live like trapped animals."

One of the emigrants who collaborated in the language programme wrote this call for support to create the "international solidarity center" (Internationales Solidaritätszentrum). It shall have the function of the piazza, which has been poorly replaced by the train stations: meeting point, alternative to the isolation enforced by emigration, counterweight to the theft of cultural identity, possibility to become an instrument of political coordination.

For the time, the initiative consists of language-learning groups, a multinational communication centre, information events and screenings informing about problematics in the countries of origin of the emigrants and here, production of countercultural and anti-media works such as comics, photo-novels, films, videos, etc. which represent and spread the problems of emigrants.

Everybody who wants to support the project are asked to transfer money to account number […]

If you are interested in further information about creation of the ISZ or want to collaborate, please contact the editors.

Ignorants of all countries, let's unite!