Nationalities of Language: Adorno's Fremdwörter *An Introduction to "On the Question: What Is German?"*

by Thomas Y. Levin

> ". . . The Germans are more incomprehensible, comprehensive, contradictory, unknown, incalculable, surprising, even frightening than other people are to themselves: they elude *definition* and are on that account alone the despair of the French. It is characteristic of the Germans that the quertion 'What is German?' never dies out among them."
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, par. 244.

In 1965 the prescience of Nietzsche's observations was dramatically confirmed by a series of radio lectures organized by the Hessische Rundfunk on the topic "What is German?" Adorno's contribution, broadcast on May 9th of that year with the name of the series as its title, follows Nietzsche's lead in its refusal of nationalist generalizations and its shift of emphasis to the very question itself. Indeed, when Adorno's essay is republished in 1969 in *Stichworte*, it is indicative that, besides the deletion of two phrases, the only significant change is an addition to the title which now reads "*On the Question:* What is German?" The ambiguity of this query allows Adorno to develop another — quite literal — line of response: what is German?, it's a language. But such a recasting of the question of nationality as a question of language and linguistic nationality generates new problems. In order to say just what is (the) German (language), one must be able to establish the identity, limits and character of a national idiom. To do this, Adorno argues, one must take a trip to another language, a voyage, as we shall see, of translation.

Adorno's essay opens with a dialectical analysis of German national stereotypes which, despite their moment of truth, are immediately dis-

missed as an unproductive line of inquiry: "It is uncertain whether there even is such a thing as the German person or a specifically German quality or anything analogous in other nations." The radicality of this claim should not be overlooked, since it effectively destroys the very foundations of traditional ontological approaches to the question "What is German?" Instead, Adorno insists on an alternative, more micrological strategy, a detour which seeks insight into the general through a careful examination of the particular. Adorno chooses as a case study his own decision to go back to Germany after years of exile in the United States and the dialectic of the foreign [*fremd*] and the native [*eigen*], of alienation and return which was involved. This new focus is not simply autobiographical, however, since, as Adorno is careful to point out, "there was also an objective factor. It is the language." While not discounting the complicated nature of his desire to return, Adorno concentrates on two linguistic experiences which really clinched the decision to leave America, both of them narratives of failed attempts at translation.[1]

Strange things happen to Adorno when moving from one language to another. He recounts how a German-speaking American publisher familiar with his *Philosophie der neuen Musik* was interested in bringing out an English-language edition and asked him to prepare a translation. Upon reading the English draft which Adorno submitted, however, the publisher suddenly discovered that the text which he earlier had so admired was "badly organized" (a term which appears *in English* in the original text). Had the translation revealed something about the "original" or was the remark a stylistic criticism of the English rendition? If Adorno's work written in German seemed to suffer in translation, one might think that this could be avoided were Adorno to *write in English.* In the second example Adorno undertakes a symptomatic reading of the violent "editing" (again in English in the original)[2] done to a lecture

1. The intimate connection between Adorno's relationship to the English language and his feelings about America is noted by Harvey Gross: "He spoke English with great precision, but it seemed to me, with a certain discomfort and sadness . . . . This estrangement from his native language was a central problem of his exile; his return to Germany was in part motivated by his desire to live where German was spoken." In: "Adorno in Los Angeles: The Intellectual in Migration," *Humanities in Society*, 2:4 (Fall 1979), 343 (Special Adorno Issue).

2. While the appearance of such a word in English in the "original" requires some sort of note when the essay is translated into English, when translated into other languages one would think that the English would simply be retained. In the French translation of Adorno's essay, however, the word "editing" is rewritten: because in French "éditer" means to publish a book or magazine, in order to capture the more violent editorial sense of the word it had to be replaced with — "rewriting" (p. 226).

which he had submitted to a West Coast psychoanalytic journal.[3] Significantly, the reference to a "quite faithful German translation" of this lecture reveals that Adorno's text was first written in English and yet, as in the first example, still remained in some sense German. How frustrating it must have been for the emigrant intellectual to come to terms with not only the failure of his own attempts at translating his own work, but also with the realization that even when he was writing "in English" he was still writing German.

Adorno, always ready to turn personal frustration into theoretical gain, recuperates this situation by subjecting it to a symptomatic reading. In the resistance to translation exhibited by his work, he argues, lies an answer to the question "what is the German language?" In fact, the insights gained through translative failure may be the only means by which, if at all, the specificity of a national idiom can be established. For example, following the seemingly Heideggerean claim that German enjoys an elective affinity to philosophy and speculative thought in general,[4] Adorno writes: "One can get an idea of this specific property of the German language most drastically in the almost prohibitive difficulty of tanslating into another language extremely demanding philosophical texts such as Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit.*" Further on, Adorno again argues that the character of a national idiom can be ascertained through the inability to translate terms such as *Geist* and *Moment* without doing violence to their semantic richness: "This impossibility suggests that there is a specific, objective quality of the German language." In translating and writing in English, Adorno sought to overcome this impossibility: the rejection of his attempts as "not English" (i.e., still German) demonstrated that the limits of translation are also the contours of national idioms.

This poses a serious problem for the translator of Adorno's text: if

3. Further evidence of the editorial violence which Adorno's English prose seemed invariably to provoke is provided by John Marshall, the man at the Rockefeller Foundation who was responsible for the Princeton Radio Research Project. In a memo dated January 5, 1940 he notes that "if Adorno's work is to have the utility which [I] would ask of it, it would have to undergo pretty complete reformulation." Cited in David E. Morrison, "Kultur and Culture: the Case of Theodor W. Adorno and Paul F. Lazarsfeld," *Social Research*, 45:2 (Summer 1978), 347-8.

4. In a more detailed analysis than is possible here it would be interesting to differentiate Adorno's position in this case from strikingly similar statements by Heidegger such as: "Along with German the Greek language is (in regard to its possibilities for thought) at once the most powerful and most spiritual of all languages." *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959/74), p. 57.

what is German is what resists translation into English, then the bulk of the essay is by definition unavailable to any English-language translation. Indeed, it is accessible *only* through the German language. Towards the end of the essay, however, there is an important destabilization of the earlier observations about the specificity of German when Adorno speculates that those remarks might simply be claims about "the domain of one's own language": "I will not venture to decide whether this condition is specific to German or whether it characterizes more generally the relation of anyone's native [*eigen*] tongue to a foreign [*fremd*] language." Once the stakes are "native" and "foreign" (rather than "German" and "non-German") the translation of the essay is not only possible, but even *desirable.* This is particularly so because the linguistic specificity produced through translative *failure* is best brought out by those moments in a translation (such as the one that follows) where "untranslatable" terms are retained in German next to their impoverished English relations as an index of the latter's inadequacy. If foreign words [*Fremdwörter*] inserted in translations are thus signifiers of translative failure, the frequent use of terms such as *Geist* throughout Adorno's essay — and the resulting regular distribution of foreign words [*Fremdwörter*] in its translation — can be read as a *staging* of the specificity of the language of the translation through repeated manifestations of untranslatability. But, if true, this claim would seem to hold only for the *translations* of Adorno's essay but not for the German-language version. Unless, of course, translation has once again revealed a previously unrecognized translative aspect of the "original" text.

Upon closer examination there are in fact a number of English *Fremdwörter* which appear, not coincidentally, immediately following the first mention of America in the second half of the essay: *keep smiling, up to date, badly organized*, and *editing.* Given Adorno's insistence on the essentiality of presentation [*Darstellung*] to philosophy, these intrusions of an "other" linguistic idiom must be carefully considered. However, in order to argue that they must be read as untranslatable moments that stage a more performative than constative response to the question "What is German?", it is necessary to take yet another detour. This one takes us through two (as yet untranslated) essays by Adorno on the subject of the *Fremdwort* — "Wörter aus der Fremde," (Words from Foreign Lands) and "Über den Gebrauch von Fremdwörtern" (On the Use of *Fremdwörter*)[5] — in which Adorno articulates their "negative, dangerous . . . power" (pp. 645-61). For it is necessary to examine the

5. In Theodor W. Adoro, *Noten zur Literatur*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), pp. 216-232 and pp. 640-646.

status and function of such *Fremdwörter* in order to grasp what is at stake when Adorno insists that the writer "can take advantage of the tension between the *Fremdwort* and the language [into which it is inserted] by incorporating the *Fremdwort* in his thinking and in his own technique" (p. 220).

From the very start the question of the *Fremdwort* is tied to the question of linguistic nationality. Adorno recounts how, as a child, he delighted in its "exterritorial and aggressive" character which provided a refuge from the increasingly unavoidable German chauvinism of the period: "The *Fremdwörter* formed tiny cells of resistance against the nationalism in the First World War" (p. 218). Adorno reads the distance between the *Fremdwort* and its linguistic context as both an index of alienation and the source of its erotic appeal (the allure of the foreign which is evident in the employment of *Fremdwörter* in recent advertising). Of primary interest to Adorno, however, is its "explosive" (p. 640) power which can be used, for example, against the stultification produced within a discipline by the constraints of its terminology: "Because of its origin in a foreign language, the *Fremdwort* can hardly be understood anymore. As a result, it is true that its use takes on a frustrating and provocative quality which anyone who does not want to become the naive victim of a specialized body of knowledge must really desire" (p. 229). To the extent that its meaning is unavailable, the *Fremdwort* gives the writer the opportunity to shift the emphasis momentarily away from the semantic to the acoustic or rhythmic dimension (p. 640). On the other hand, a strategically placed *Fremdwort* (can also help *specify* a semantic field. In both German and English, for example, "society" or "Gesellschaft" have the double sense of society in general as well as a social elite. But, because the English word "society" *in the context of German* means "high-society," Adorno can emphasize the latter of the two meanings in his German text by employing the *Fremdwort* hybrid "society-*Leute*" (society people, p. 229). In all these cases, it is the "otherness" of the *Fremdwort* which enables it to perform in ways unavailable to any "native" word: "In the constellation in which it is employed," Adorno writes, "only the *Fremdwort* can generate the spark which conveys the meaning better, more truly and less compromisingly than the available German synonyms" (p. 225).

A cursory glance at Adorno's writings suffices to reveal the frequency and variety of *Fremdwörter.* If one looks at just the titles of the aphorisms in *Minima Moralia*, for example, one already encounters Italian, French, English, Latin and Greek as well as German. A catalogue of the *Fremdwörter* employed by Adorno often reads like a paratactic social symptomatology. This is certainly the case for the English words scattered throughout Adorno's work, such as "teamwork," "hit

parade," "conditioned reflexes," "corny," "crooner," "jitterbugs," "sampling," "name bands," as well as the following whose foreignness is not even signalled by quotation marks or italics: streamlining, tough guy, underdog, lowbrow, disciminatory power, and best-seller.[6] It could in fact be argued that the hilarious catalogue of cultural stereotypes in such a list of *Fremdwörter* reveals more about Adorno's perception of America than the accounts dealing explicitly with his stay in the United States such as "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America."[7]

The reaction to the use of *Fremdwörter* is almost invariably negative: one of Adorno's *Fremdwort* essays was, in fact, written in response to angry objections to his use of *Fremdwörter* in a radio lecture on Proust. Even Paul F. Lazarsfeld, director of the Princeton Radio Research Project and long-time Adorno supporter, berates his colleague for what he takes to be simply indulgent and gratuitous elitism: "Don't you think it is a perfect fetishism the way you use Latin words all through your text? There is no doubt that the words 'necessary condition' express everything which the corresponding Latin words express, but you evidently feel magically more secure if you use words which symbolize your education."[8] According to Adorno, however, the objections to the *Fremdwort* are primarily a displacement of an (unconscious) resistance to either a threatening line of argument or to the relativizing radicality of such linguistic "otherness." To emphasize this point Adorno recounts how he delivered a lecture in the United States in which all *Fremdwörter* had been carefully deleted and yet afterwards was still criticized for using *Fremdwörter*! Whether it was the German pronunciation or syntax of Adorno's lecture which rendered it so foreign — another instance where his English remained German — the intensitv of this resistance to the linguistically alien is certainly indicative.

What is at stake, writes Adorno, is the myth of a pure Ur-idiom and the ideal of the internally coherent and organic nature of language: "In

6. H. Stuart Hughes has compiled an amusing list of Anglicisms and Americanisms in Adorno's sociological writings: healthy sex life, some fun, go-getters, social research, team, middle range theory, trial and error, administrative research, common sense, fact-finding, statement of fact, case studies, facts and figures, nose counting, likes and dislikes. In: *The Sea Change: The Migration of Social Thought 1930-1965* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), note #50, p. 166.

7. Translated by Donald Fleming in *The Intellectual Migration*, Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 338-370. In *Stichworte* this essay comes immediately after "On the Question: What is German?," which indicates that Adorno considered the latter among the accounts of his American sojourn.

8. In a letter to Adorno cited by Morrison, "*Kultur* and Culture," 336.

every *Fremdwort* there resides the dynamite of Enlightenment; in its controlled usage lies the knowledge that the immediate cannot be expressed immediately, but only through extended reflection and mediation" (p. 221). In its insistence on the historical character of even the most 'natural' and seemingly 'organic' folk-idiom [*Volkssprache*], the *Fremdwort* challenges man's mastery over language: "What one resents in the *Fremdwort* is, not least, that it reveals the condition of all words: that language once again imprisons those who use it and actually fails as their very own medium" (p. 221). According to Wilhelm von Humboldt (whose influence on his own theory of language Adorno acknowledges) the constraints imposed by the prisonhouse of any language are revealed in the same process that first constitutes the specificity of that national idiom — in translation: "Every language draws a circle around the people to which it belongs, a circle from which one can only escape in so far as one at the same time enters another one."[9] If, in a translation, the *Fremdwort* refers to the language of the "original" text, the use of the *Fremdwort* within the "original" text itself functions in juxtaposition [*Gegenübersetzung*] to the language of that text like a counter- or reverse-translation [*Gegen-Übersetzung*]. In both cases what is so disturbing about the *Fremdwort* is that as a paradigmatic encounter of the foreign [*fremd*] and the native [*eigen*], as a performance of untranslatability, it simultaneously constitutes the specificity of a national idiom and destroys the myth of its "natural" or "organic" status by exposing its limits. The moment Adorno discovers his "own" language — his answer to the question "What is German?" is thus, "it's my native tongue" — is the moment that he recognizes that this language is not his at all: thus what remains is the imperative of "critical self-reflection." The use of *Fremdwörter* to produce such translative force-fields is necessary, Adorno argues (in a very Benjaminian manner), because "it may be that today shock is perhaps the only possibility of reaching people through language" (p. 224). It is through translative constellations rather than through sustained discursivity that "the discrepancy between *Fremdwort* and language can be enlisted in the service of truth" (p. 220).

In a passage from *One Way Street* to which Adorno alludes in both of the *Fremdwort* essays, Walter Benjamin describes how the writer treats thought like a surgeon who, during the course of a (compositional)

9. Wilhelm v. Humboldt, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI:1, ed. by Albert Leitzmann (Berlin: B. Behr's Verlag, 1907), p. 180; compare the translation by Samuel Weber in his introduction to Adorno's *Prisms* entitled "Translating the Untranslatable" (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), p. 9.

operation "inserts a *Fremdwort* like a silver rib." According to Adorno's gloss, this prosthesis is necessary for the survival of the linguistic corpus [*Sprachleib*] which was dying of organic causes. In "On the Question: What is German?" Adorno has also added four prosthetic supplements — four *Fremdwörter.*[10] Two of them — "badly organized" and "editing" — are followed by German translations, a combination which implies both that the *Fremdwort can* be translated and, since the translation is not a replacement but an addition, that it *cannot be.* Furthermore, "badly organized" appears within quotations, marking it perhaps as a citation of the words used by the "emigrant publisher" who is described in a later deleted clause as "more American than the born Americans." The use of the English expression rather than the appropriate German words (which Adorno provides as the translation) may have struck Adorno as a repression of national difference and an instance, in the domain of language, of the adaptation which he so criticized. Such pairing of *Fremdwort* and translation stages explicitly the translative encounter (so central to Adorno's argument) which then occurs in a more veiled form in the two remaining English *Fremdwörter*: keep smiling and up to date. These appear with no indication of their foreign-ness and, for that reason, are all the more dangerous. What is so threatening about such unmarked linguistic aliens is conveyed in the distinction, in German, between the *Fremdwort* and the *Lehnwort* (borrowed word), the latter defined as a word of foreign origin which has become so assimilated in the course of time that its foreign-ness is known only to experts.[11] The recognizable foreign-ness of the *Fremdwort* raises the question as to whether other words might not be *Lehnwörter*, i.e., *Fremdwörter* in disguise, and thereby casts aspersions on the "purity" of the most seemingly "native" words. The Nazis, not surprisingly, systematically eliminated the *Fremdwörter* from their literature and pedagogy from the very start.[12] In doing so they revealed very

10. Houston Stewart Chamberlain — the only figure (beside himself) that Adorno discusses as particularly indicative of the problem of nationality — is described as a "Germanized English-man," a vertiable personification of the *Fremdwort*!

11. For more discussion of the history of the *Fremdwort* and as evidence of an attempt to reduce its foreign-ness, see A.J. Bliss, *A Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases in Current English* (London: RKP, 1966), esp. pp. 1061. For a catalogue of borrowed words [*Lehnworte*] see *The Stanford Dictionary of Anglicised Words and Phrases*, (1892).

12. This began as early as May 1933, for example, in a speech on "The New Education" given by Wilhelm Frick, Minister of the Interior, at a conference of ministers of state governments: "Our mother tongue, whose harmony, power and flexibility we can be proud of, belongs to the noblest of values, whose preservation lies close to our hearts. Unfortunately, its purity is not always cared for as much as is desirable. Even government offices employ superfluous *Fremdwörter*, which plainly endanger the com-

clearly, as violent resistance often does, what is at stake: the possibility of linguistic nationalism. In this light one can begin to appreciate the chilling insight of Adorno's aphoristic claim in *Minima Moralia*: "*Fremdwörter*," he writes, "are the Jews of language."[13]

---

prehension of language among wide sections of the people. The school has in this respect important tasks to fulfill so that we can hand down the precious treasure of the German language pure and unadulterated." In: *Documents on Nazism 1919-1945*, Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds. (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 352. German in *Ursachen und Folgen: Vom deutschen Zusammenbruch 1918 und 1945 bis zur staatlichen Neuordnung Deutschlands in der Gegenwart*, ed. by H. Michaelis, et al. (Berlin: undated), vol. IX, pp. 445-6.

13. *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980), p. 123; in E.F.N. Jephcott's translation (London: New Left Books, 1974), p. 110, the curious rendition of *Fremdwort* in the above quotation as "German words of foreign derivation" manifests the return of a repressed linguistic nationalism.