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11 April 2020

### **The Role of Language and Sociolinguistics in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone***

In Jenny Erpenbeck's 2015 novel *Go, Went, Gone*, protagonist Richard, a retired classics professor in Berlin, meets and eventually befriends a group of refugees living in Oranienplatz, and through conducting interviews about their lives, learns about the plight of asylum seekers in Germany. Inspired by Erpenbeck's real life experiences, *Go, Went, Gone* also comments on the way in which German society, and German language, has the power to change and be changed by the ever-evolving immigration issues within the country. Through her use of sociolinguistics, Erpenbeck structures a three-pronged argument using German's unique time-manner-place linguistic typology, in order to explore language's function in the moral and ethical questions surrounding the treatment of refugees and migratory groups in Germany.

Sociolinguistics remains vastly important to the study of the transnational and the national. In one of the earliest recorded statements regarding the discipline, scholar William Dwight Whitney claimed speech not to be "a personal possession; but a social...The whole development of speech, though initiated by individuals, is wrought out by the community" (Whitney 404). This very idea of sociolinguistics stems from German concept of *Geisteswissenschaften*, which is closely related to the modern-day study of the humanities. Its chief advocate, the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, argued that the *verstehen*, or interpretation of the individual, impacted not just an individual's understanding of his or her culture, history, and society, rather that this interpretation could have long lasting effects in the general community as a whole (Dilthey 70). This shift in thought surrounding the experience of the individual and the

experience of the collective body shifted approaches of study in European linguistics, eventually giving way to scholars like Whitney and his contemporaries.

Sociolinguistics, simply put, is the study of the societal factors that influence language, and the ways in which language defines these same societal factors (Sarles & Stokoe 83). In *Go, Went, Gone*, Erpenbeck references the implications of sociolinguistics often, albeit without outright naming the discipline. The refugees Richard meets and eventually befriends are obligated to learn German throughout their plot arc in the novel, because the Bundesregierung in Germany considers this to be one of the most crucial elements in the process of integrating into German society. One's first instinct might be to dismiss this as being self-explanatory, to merely accept that Germany is a country that speaks German, so in order to be successful in Germany, one must also speak German. This notion, however, is not so simple. Germans themselves actually did not prioritize language learning of many of the German diasporas, preferring to form so-called *Sprachinseln* (Engl: "language islands") in their new host countries in order to keep living their routine lives in their native language (Fluchte 28), so the idea of necessity is actually quite antiquated considering the transnational modern world.

When Richard first sits in on one of these language lectures, he realizes that "understanding", in the same way that Dilthey first defined the word, requires more than just a simple knowledge of words and sounds; rather, "it's basically necessary to already know what that person [talking] means or is saying" (Erpenbeck 74). Teaching German, and more importantly the culture that goes along with the language, is central to the government's policy's goals regarding immigration.

Every language is the product of the culture that created it, and every culture continues to further define itself by its linguistic properties. German's linguistic typology denotes two key

factors that Erpenbeck stresses throughout the novel: it's pluricentricity and the strict order of adpositional phrases in time-manner-place. Pluricentric or polycentric languages have more than one standard language; this means that this language must be spoken in drastic variations within more than one country at an official level, meaning governmental bodies and federal learning institutions. Moreover, speakers of this language much acknowledge said pluricentricity, and consider it a defining part of their own national and social identity (Muhr 30). German, in comparison to other languages, has an incredible amount of variations; this makes situations like those of the refugees so much more difficult, as there is not even one standard language for them to learn (Barbour & Stevenson 3).

This confusion is only the start of the problem, however. Erpenbeck argues that it is beyond the "strange" pronunciations or the "irregular verbs," as Richard guesses, rather that "it's difficult to learn a language if you don't know what it's for" (Erpenbeck 75). It is not enough to supply refugees with integration tools, or more accurately supply them with cultural building blocks; the government needs to provide actual aide. Erpenbeck introduces her argument against Western federal immigration policies, and throughout the book she employs the latter half of German linguistic typology, time-manner-place, to drive this matter home.

Time-manner-place is a type of language whose structure is defined by a rigid order of adpositional phrases (McKay 27). To define it simply, German is one of the few languages in the world that dictate the order in which one can announce in a sentence when something occurred, how something occurred, and where something occurred. In *Go, Went, Gone*, Erpenbeck stresses this same rigidity in order to mimic German bureaucratic behaviors and explore aspects of time, manner, and place within the German refugee crisis, linguistically speaking.

When considering a language's relationship with time, it is critical to remember language's control over history. Language serves as an instrument of ideological state apparatuses. Defined by Louis Althusser in 1970, an ideological state apparatus refers to an institution within a nation or society, such as the government, the church, or schools, which plays a role in inculcating capitalist values within the individual (Althusser). Language functions within this system even beyond capitalistic values, as it decides what is important, and who actually gets heard. Richard remarks that he has no basic concept of different countries in Africa (Erpenbeck 23) but is stunned to find out that others outside of Germany may never have heard of Hitler (119). Beyond this, Richard's own profession as a classics professor dictates the importance to which he gives certain histories, electing to give the refugees names like Apollo or Tristan (66). Richard's own ideas of historical importance reflect a Western cultural emphasis on Eurocentric ideas.

On a national level, Germany itself struggles with its perception of its national history. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or dealing with the past, dominates the political and social conversation surrounding immigration policies (Kushner 10). This is to say that Germans are still very self-involved when it comes to understanding their own history regarding the Holocaust (and the German Democratic Republic to a lesser extent), and while these feelings have promoted liberal immigration policies, Erpenbeck argues that it is necessary to decenter oneself from one's own universe.

As far as the "manner" aspect of Erpenbeck's argument, she acknowledges the cultural divide between oneself and the so-called 'Other,' but not just between Richard and the refugees. Richard himself recounts his experience traveling to America, and despite speaking fluent English, he was unable to properly communicate with Americans due to cultural nuances

(Erpenbeck 185). Erpenbeck does argue back against the notion that there is something fundamentally different between individuals from different cultures, pointing out that through things like music and shared experience, can we find beauty in the unfamiliar (Erpenbeck 121).

Erpenbeck's last argument deals with the most important aspect to consider when discussing immigration policy: place. Germany historically defined its nationhood on its linguistic properties, so language and politics have been intertwined for over a century (Townsend 7). In finding a sense of home in their own country, Erpenbeck argues that these same people have inadvertently (or sometimes purposefully) invented an 'Other' against which to defend it "so aggressively that it almost looks like war" (Erpenbeck 241). The solution that the government provides is to allow immigrants into the country but do little else to ease their burden of displacement.

Erpenbeck stresses sociolinguistics throughout her novel because it encompasses all of the issues the refugees in Germany face. Richard remarks that one "had to know a lot more than just the name [of things], otherwise there was no point" (Erpenbeck 31), which is a direct callback to the study of sociolinguistics, but also to the issue that Western policy seems to be having with immigration laws. Words cannot make up for lack of action to rectify the refugees' current situation, which is why language is represented as both tantamount and futile throughout the novel. To answer Erpenbeck's following question of "what makes a surface [referring to language] a surface" and "what separates it from air" (31), the answer *Go, Went, Gone* supplies is simple: use language to listen rather than speak, and replace platitudes with concrete actions.

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