Limited Language/Linguistic Limitations:
A Reply to the Reviews

Antje Schlottmann[1]

Institut für Geographie, Sozialgeographie, Universität Jena,
Grietgasse 6, 07743 Jena
Email: Antje.Schlottmann@uni-jena.de

The three reviews gathered here examine my work from very different academic contexts. They let this symposium become a virtual interface of different thought traditions, discourses and research foci. This interface not only connects German and English research paradigms, but also represents a negotiation of different languages and their respective styles of argumentation. I am delighted that my book presents the occasion for such an integrative dialogue, and that in this reply I have the opportunity to expand this communication even further.

In what follows I will briefly take up some major points of the critics. However, I do not aim to justify what I have written. Rather, I want to engage with the given discussion to develop some further thoughts and new questions. In my view, the reviews show, in a positive way, what is left to do. In addition, they strengthen the argument that a deeper discussion of the prospects and limitations of what I call SpaceTalk is important – in particular across existing discursive and linguistic boundaries.

The points that my argument below is concerned with are: (1) the political dimension of SpaceTalk, (2) the construction of the subject, (3) (re)presentation as

---

an (im)possible starting point for research and (4) differences in discourses and writing styles, especially in German and Anglo-American Human Geography.

The Political Dimension of SpaceTalk

According to the critics, a major shortcoming of my analysis of linguistic geography-making is its limited reach in terms of political power constellations. Kathrin Hörschelmann and Ulf Strohmayer in particular stress the importance of contextualizing ("locating") the authors of the analyzed press material. Only this discursive contextualization, they argue, can unveil the deeper power structures of the German East-West discourse and its problematic political implications.

My decision against such "locating" was that in doing so I would reproduce a prescriptive category in an unreflective way, thereby reproducing the very East-West dualism I aimed to reveal. Why should it matter where the journalists come from? Asked more provocatively: why should their place of origin (or of birth) determine their writing style or even their state of mind? What should keep an East German journalist from writing (and thinking) in a "West-German manner"? Aren't these allegedly self-evident categories themselves misleading- because they distract from the structural conditions of common SpaceTalk? I was more interested in the speech acts that gave regions and regionally located subjects the *appearance* of being spatially determined, with East (and West) Germany being only one example amongst many. In other words, I did not want to be a victim myself of the self-fulfilling prophecy I describe, i.e. to presuppose and to confirm a difference at the same time. Consequently, while developing my theoretical framework, I aimed to avoid any prescriptive categorization and rather step beyond the categories in order to examine their everyday use.

But the critics revealed the risk of such an approach: on the one hand, it might lead to the delusive idea that a non-political position is *possible in principle*. On the other hand, as Matt Hannah pointed out, a "pre-political community" might appear.

I certainly see the problem that the induced anonymity creates only apparent neutrality. Subjects are taken out of their discursive context, leaving the reader without a point of reference about the (subjective) background of the applied perspectives or an evaluative placement of articulated positions (in the same manner as, for instance, anonymous review processes work). But this abstraction – as long as one is conscious of it – does not need to be misleading. Instead, I argue, it opens the view for implicit language structures and logics of argumentation. Thus I am convinced that the requested contextualization ("*this* text by *this* author appearing in *this* newspaper") would inevitably have lead me right into the (ideological and moral) debate about, for example, a "discredited East Germany." The "practical necessity" of certain spatial imaginations would have disappeared from my sight.

But how can this epistemological dilemma be solved? How can a researcher appreciate the political discourse she inevitably enters – especially when dealing with "East Germany" as case study – without reproducing the established categories and their corresponding connotations? The solution lies, as Matt Hannah suggested, closer than expected. As I argue, the dilemma of being always involved in the construction of a region when researching 'it' (by naming it, referring to its boundaries, its inner homogeneity, etc.) can be solved by keeping the region in question a hypothesis ("region in suspenso"). Likewise, the political involvement of any significative regionalisation (my book included!) must be hypothetically presupposed ("politics in suspenso").

This epistemological artifice turns the political discourse from an *explanans* to an *explanandum*. Hence sufficient reflexive distance is provided to acknowledge the practical necessity of any categorization. Consequently, by asking for alternative structuring practises, a constructive critique can be presented that does not halt at an (inevitably biased) critique of concomitant discourses. Questions such as "Why does it seem to be plausible to refer to East-Germany as an 'underdeveloped' region?" and "Doesn't this categorization inevitably lead to the construction of 'losers'?" would then be accompanied by the question of whether there are any alternative categories at hand to identify, for instance, the target for financial help. Likewise, the question of how the category of the 'East-German woman' is discursively produced and whose interests this spatial stereotype serves would be accompanied by considerations about a potentially more adequate way of identifying subjects.

The Construction of the Subject

Regarding the category 'East-German woman' in particular, it has been critically remarked that my analysis has a limited reach concerning the "constructedness" of the subjects due to its action-centred theoretical orientation. But this, pardon the objection, is not the case. Admittedly, I did not give much attention to the construction of subjects, since I was primarily concerned with SpaceTalk, not SubjectTalk.

Nevertheless, the approach I offer is one that does not rely on the subject as analytical starting point. This is why I refuse to deal analytically with categories such as 'East-German journalists'. The concept of power as ability, as Giddens has it, is relaxed through the concept of "intentionality" (Searle, 1983). Intentionality, in Searle's sense, does not necessarily presuppose conscious and competent intentional action. The communicative possibilities and restrictions of SpaceTalk thereby apply to both privileged and underprivileged positions. In this respect linguistic action is never free. Regarding this limitation, I argue, however, that two

dimensions should analytically be kept apart: an implicit "spatialization" as habitualized in our language community (the "grammar" of SpaceTalk), and an explicit meaning of space that can be negotiated in principle, but whose negotiation is limited by discursive power structures.

Much the same can be said for the category of the subject: the fact *that* we speak of subjects (and even "nature") is a practically necessary structuration practice. *In what way* we speak about subjects is contingent and discursively conditioned ('East-German woman'). The subject hence must be conceptualized as implicitly constructed in significative practice. At the same time, however, the idea of the subject is a powerful tool to reduce complexity and a constitutive condition of a variety of social facts, combined with norms and values such as "moral", "objective", "targets", "failures", ""responsibility", "suppression" and "discrimination". Therefore it cannot easily be abandoned or replaced; and alternatives – again – need to be thought about thoroughly.

Hence, yes, the "free modern subject" is a construction, but it is not necessarily a political one. Rather, it is a construction that occurs in everyday life. Our everyday language, one could say, is neither space-less nor subject-less. And by commonly referring to the (free) acting subject this subject becomes real in a social sense. It is indeed the task of social sciences to critically observe this reality – but not without considering its social usefulness – instead of dismissing it in search of a new subject-less language (here I follow Wittgenstein, 1985 [1952], 304).

To continue this thought: representatives of neurophysiology recently spread the idea that there are no such things as "free will" or single subjects, but a network of dislocated actors (actants?) in the brain (Singer, 2003; 2005). This (positivistic) argument, however, bypasses the social reality of the subject. The argument is (tautologically) plausible in respect to the existing convention that the social is not a subject matter of the 'hard' sciences. It becomes precarious, however, when social reality is at the same time reduced to an "illusion".

It is simple to state that it is not "us" who have wants, but our brains that fool us by just simulating that it is "us" who have wants. However, this statement ignores the fact that the above insight can only be reasonable because we conventionally know who this (paradoxical) "we", which is fooled by the brain, is. Sometimes this argument is countered by suggesting that we need (non-scientific) language to *communicate about* (true) reality (Singer, 2003, 17). As a consequence of such a reductionism, language is understood as just a (albeit still insufficient) tool for representing "hard facts". In this sense neurophysiology proposes that we have simply been mistaken for centuries in terms of our subject conception and that *scientific* evidence should lead to *social* restructuring. As far as I know, however, no neurologist has convincingly theorized the connection between dislocated neural

flows, represented (and constructed) by magnetic resonance imaging, and social subject conventions and their respective everyday linguistic performance.

However, from an observer's perspective – as Kathrin Hörschelmann put it – the point is not to state ontological facts. Next we must ask: what is at stake if the subject is presented as a misapprehension? Which phenomena are based on the idea of a rational or free subject? What would become of critical analytic categories such as "authority", "entitlement" or "suppression"? Admittedly, these questions are anthropocentric to the core. However, they provide an indication of what is at stake when we try to abandon anthropocentrism in favor of, for instance, "competent neuronal networks".

(Re)Presentation as Starting Point for Research

The previous thoughts lead me to stress the general importance of research into speech acts and (textual) representation for a critical geography – a point on which, delightfully, all commentators and I agree. In this respect, "non-representational" and "actor-network" approaches need to be considered. These concepts criticise the inherent anthropocentrism of socio-constructivist approaches and aim to broaden the idea of "action" insomuch as both human and non-human agents are taken into account (Thrift, 1999; Murdoch, 1997).

It is important to recognize an existing asymmetry in contemporary nature-culture conceptions and to critically reveal the hidden anthropocentric biases of these conceptions. Apart from ontological argumentation, however, such approaches should be discussed in terms of their epistemological and political effects – their potential benefits and risks. In this respect, the message that the linguistic turn and social constructivism are outdated approaches seems fatal if it results in a theoretical u-turn whereby any discursive construction of reality is presented as a mistake of the past (again, a rather positivistic argument). To take representation as starting point for (critical) inquiry does not necessarily imply that there is no such thing as material reality and corresponding *presentation*. Still, when following the "post-postconstructivist" approaches, one may get the idea that representation-centred concepts should be abandoned altogether. But what would be the consequences? The epistemological concern to uncover an inner meaning of things seems problematic. In addition, such a stance could lead to an inflation of the critical potential of social constructivism that has recently begun to unfold in non-scholarly (political) discourses. Retracting socio-constructivist insights as a matter of principle, I would argue, could result in a strengthening of essentialist positions, even if a so-called "third way" is pursued.

Furthermore, turning one's back on the examination of (re)presentational practices jeopardizes an engaged scholarship that not only aims to *join in*, but also to *reflect on* everyday communication patterns; a scholarship that elucidates how decisions are anticipated in signification and, at the same time, explains how truth-claims are presented as being naturally given, stable and incontrovertible; and, finally, a scholarship that is capable of disrupting powerful discourses by revealing their representational taken-for-granted character.

Hence, I do not doubt the importance of balancing a reasonable application of "symmetrical thinking". However, one should be aware that critical arguments, such as "naturalizing effects" (Matt Hannah), disappear once "the natural" is conceptualized as being genuinely ("naturally") given. Such arguments can only be put forward by an (anthropocentric) understanding of the construction of 'nature' via speech acts and truth claims *about* 'nature'. And if we propose that it is not us but our inner nature (brains, neurons, hormones) "who" acts, then it is the representational approach- that shows that this is not only symmetric thinking but also hidden anthropocentric metaphorics, which can become a dangerous blank cheque for ideological projections.

Differences in Discourses

As a final remark – and in respect to the latter comments and the general aim of the symposium – I want to address the gap between different "academic languages" and scholarly styles. In German discourse scholars are, to a certain degree, socialized into the (systematic) development of the theoretical inventory. This process often produces fairly abstract arguments that – from a different stance – seem detached from everyday life and hard to digest. My "argumentative gymnastics", as Matt Hannah called it, derive from this requirement for the (critical) engagement with and elaboration of existing theories. Admittedly, though, in certain passages my text is very detailed, intricate and hardly comprehensible without understanding the theoretical tradition that it follows. English-language scholarly publications are often much more direct, drawn more closely from everyday life and less exclusive. Accordingly, the Anglo-American popular science literature is more widespread and accepted than that in Germany, where popular science is – generally speaking – disregarded as "unreliable".

However, what can we learn from this divergence regarding intercultural scholarly communication – aside from any particular linguistic talents of the authors? Which model is supposed to succeed? To think about these issues seems reasonable, not least because it leads to far-reaching critical questions such as: is presenting scientific results in a journalistic format a misguided tribute to a spreading consumerism? And if so, who actually are the desired consumers of human-

geographic research? Should we understand such an orientation in the context of the process of the privatization of science (which has only recently become a point of discussion in Germany)? Or, conversely, is the journalistic style the (only) proper way to bring scholarly thoughts to society? Don't we need exciting "hooks" and an appealing language in order to prevail against the overwhelming flood of textual and visual materials? The discussion about these questions must, in my view, be deepened – in the German-speaking community as well as between the different geographical traditions of thought, language and style.

Incidentally, comments regarding my writing style turned out to be quite heterogeneous. Whereas Ulf Strohmayer criticises my undoubtedly pronounced "German academic writing style", previous German referees remarked that the book is engaging and fluently written. Once again, this divergence shows the importance of cross-lingual exchange – preferably without the need for translation – in order to become aware of one's own linguistic style and limitations, and their acceptance in different discursive contexts.

References

Murdoch, Jonathan. 1997. Towards a geography of heterogenous associations. *Progress in Human Geography* 21(3), 321-337.

Searle, John R. 1983. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. New York: University Press.

Singer, Wolf. 2005. The brain: An orchestra without a conductor. *Max Planck Research* 3, 14-18.

Singer, Wolf. 2003. *Ein neues Menschenbild? Gespräche über Hirnforschung*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.

Thrift, Nigel. 1999. Steps to an ecology of place. In, D. Massey, J. Allen & P. Sarre (eds.) *Human Geography Today*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 295-322.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1985 [1952]. *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, *Werkausgabe, Band I*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.