Some contemporary sociolinguists love to hate an 18th century educator, philosopher, theologian, translator and general polymath by the name of Herder. Hardly a week goes by with an article denouncing something “Herderian” coming across my desk. Let me start by providing a small selection of quotes related to “Herderian” as it appears in contemporary sociolinguistics (I’m not providing references because it is not my intention to single out any particular colleague):

“… the monoglot Herderian ideology …”
“… Herder’s 18th century writings are now common terminology in reference to one-language one-nation ideologies …”
“… the classic “Herderian” triad people-language-territory …”
“… a typical Herderian cocktail of one language-one culture-one territory …”
“… the “Herderian triad;” an adult-centric, modernist notion that language is tied to identity and located in a specific (and singular) place …”
“… the Herderian triad defines a person a native of a single language …”
“… the Herderian triad has made us obsessed with bounded communities …”
“… the Herderian triad also leads to places being colonized for one language or another …”
“… Herder’s romantic view of the ‘Volk’ is back in force …”

“Once we leave the Orthodox and Herderian combination behind, as we do in almost all of Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, we find that the combination of zealous Islam and triumphalist Westernization has often had a regional impact, much as Catholicism and the Industrial Revolution had had earlier in the West.”
I could go on. While the meaning of these quotes may not be entirely clear, the overall message is summed up easily: “Herderian” refers to an objectionable ideological mélange of retrograde thought about the relationship between language and society.

While I am pretty confident that I am not doing any of the writers I have quoted here an injustice by assuming that they have never read a single original line written by Herder in their lives, I can guess who they have read and where the current Herder-bashing in sociolinguistics comes from: a book chapter by anthropologists Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs first published in 2000 and then adapted for another book chapter in 2003, where it is entitled “Language, poetry, and Volk in eighteenth-century Germany: Johann Gottfried Herder’s construction of tradition” (Bauman & Briggs, 2000, 2003).

I want to show here that their interpretation of Herder as a theorist of monolingualism, of static nationalism and of the boundedness of communities is highly questionable. I will do so by concentrating on Herder’s ideas related to multilingualism, language learning and intercultural communication but the overall thrust of my argument is similar to the one advanced by the philosopher and Herder translator Michael Forster regarding the perception of Herder in political philosophy:

Concerning international politics, Herder is often classified as a “nationalist” or (even worse) a “German nationalist,” but this is deeply misleading and unjust. On the contrary, his fundamental position in international politics is a committed cosmopolitanism, in the sense of an impartial concern for all human beings. This is a large part of the force of his ideal of “humanity.” Hence in the Letters his slogan is “No one for himself only, each for all!” and he approvingly quotes Fénelon’s remark, “I love my family more than myself; more than my family my fatherland; more than my fatherland humankind.” (Forster, 2002, p. xxxi.)

Herder as a “German” author
Herder is a “German” author but what it meant to be “German” in the 18th century is very different from what that means today (and has meant at various points in between). The historian Dirk Hoerder suggests that, if we wanted to use today's terminology, it might be a good idea to describe Herder as “transnational”:

He came from an East Prussian German family, experienced the hierarchical multicultural urban life of Riga and was thus socialized during a critical period of his intellectual development in the context of the Baltic segment of the Tsarist Empire, was subject to the Russian administrative and hegemonic culture, and came into contact with French Enlightenment thought. He migrated to the multiply dynastically segmented cultures of the Lippe region in present-day North Rhine Westphalia and then moved to Weimar, the political capital of Saxony-Weimar and a center of German high culture. Referring in particular to the many Baltic and Slavic cultures ruled by distant imperial dynasties, he postulated in his Outline of a Philosophical History of Humanity (Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit) the equal value of different cultures which—under God’s benevolence—develop from the spirit of common people (Volksgeist). In modern terms, Herder was transnational in spirit and practice. (Hoerder, 2008, p. 5f.)

Let me tell you a bit about Herder’s fascinating life story.

Johann Gottfried Herder was born in 1744 into a relatively poor family of the lower gentry in the town of Mohrungen, today Morąg. Morąg is located in Poland; Mohrungen in the 18th century was mostly part of East Prussia but shifted ownership between the Prussians and the Russians during the Seven Years' War (1755-1764). The town of some 1,800 inhabitants had a resident German majority and a Polish minority, and various troops coming and going periodically.

Broadly speaking, the area of north-east Europe where Morąg is located had been the subject of imperial expansion projects – mostly German, Russian and Swedish – and the wars this inflicted on their populations for centuries. So, one of Herder’s formative experiences was being the inhabitant of a war-torn border place fought over by different imperial dynasties. And that’s where his aversion to imperial expansion and his lifelong obsession with finding a better way for humans to organize their affairs and to live in peace started.

In Mohrungen the young Herder felt stifled by poverty, provincialism, a tyrannical master to whom he was apprenticed and a general lack of opportunity. Like many young men before him and many since, he dreamt of leaving, emigrating, seeing the big wide world.

The opportunity to make good on his dreams arose when a Russian army surgeon offered to take the 18-year-old on as a trainee. The young Herder was delighted. He accepted against the misgivings of his parents, who he would never see again, and off he went.

The offer from the Russian army surgeon confirmed his passionate admiration for all things Russian: a few months earlier his first publication had been a poem of admiration devoted to the Russian emperor. Writing in 1880 in a very different intellectual and political climate, Herder’s biographer (Haym, 1880, p. 15) diagnosed Herder with “broken patriotism” (“gebrochenem Patriotismus”) because his youthful poem was in honour not of the “native” (“angestammt”) but the “foreign” monarch.
At the age of 18, Herder arrived in what was then Königsberg, the metropolis of East Prussia, and is today Kaliningrad, the Russian enclave between Poland and Lithuania. The study of surgery did not work out because Herder fainted during his first practical observation.

Although penniless, Herder was determined not to return to Mohrungen and to try his luck in the big city instead. Armed with a reference from his despised Mohrungen master, he received a scholarship to study theology at the local college. The scholarship covered accommodation and board and in return he had to take on all kinds of jobs in the college. The college, Collegium Fridericianum, was a Latin-medium institution that attracted students from around the Baltics.

After three years in Königsberg, at the age of 20, Herder was offered his first “real” job, as a clergyman and schoolmaster in Riga. Herder was excited to leave his fatherland and his status as a Prussian subject behind; forever, as it turned out. Years later he wrote:

*Als ich mein Vaterland Preußen zum ersten Mal verließ, hätte ich vor Freude an der Grenze bei Polangen auf die Erde fallen und sie wie Brutus küssen mögen. In Riga habe ich die fröhlichste Blüte meines Lebens erlebt. When I left my fatherland Prussia for the first time, I was so happy that, like Brutus, I would have liked to fall down and kiss the earth at the border at Palanga. In Riga I experienced the happiest time of my life.* (Quoted from Kantzenbach, 1970, p. 23)

The old Hanseatic city, today the capital of Latvia, had only a few decades earlier changed hands from Sweden to Russia. Like most cities of the Hanseatic League, Riga was a cosmopolitan city. Socially, the German- and Russian-speaking upper classes dominated over the subjected Latvian majority.

Herder was deeply impressed by Latvian culture such as peasant songs and dances, and his lifelong dedication to the collection and preservation of folksongs started there. He was also deeply impressed by the misery in which most of the Latvian serf population lived. His admiration for Latvian folk culture coupled with the keenness with which he felt the injustice of Latvian serfdom influenced Herder’s thinking around cultural nationalism.
deeply. His view was that Latvian had the potential to be a great language and culture but was kept in a state of barbarity by the exploitative conditions in which Latvians were forced to live by their various German, Swedish and Russian overlords.

Despite the fact that Herder loved Riga – for the first time in his life he fell able to overcome the social handicap of his modest provincial background – he was also very aware of the limitations of his knowledge, which he felt to be too bookish and too narrow. He longed to expand his horizons and in 1769, after almost five years in Riga, he took an extended leave of absence from his position to travel the world. Although the Riga Council kept his position open for him, he would never return to Riga, either.

Herder had huge ambitions for his travels: he wanted to further his practical education so that he would later be in a better position to serve in the education and the general betterment of the Livonian province in particular and the Russian empire in general. To achieve his ambitions he felt he needed to travel and in his diary he set out his ambitions:

[...] Frankreich, England und Italien und Deutschland in diesem Betracht durchreisen, Französische Sprache und Wohlstand, Englischen Geist der Realität und Freiheit, Italienischen Geschmack feiner Erfindungen, Deutsche Gründlichkeit und Kenntnisse, und endlich, wo es nötig ist, Holländische Gelehrsamkeit einsammeln, [...] und den Geist der Gesetzgebung, des Commerces und der Policei gewinnen, alles im Gesichtspunkt von Politik, Staat und Finanzen einzusehen wagen, Vergnügen, und Charaktere und Pflichten, und alles, was Menschen hier glücklich machen kann, sei meine erste Aussicht. [...] with this aim I want to travel in France, England, Italy and Germany; I want to learn about the French language and French wealth, English spirit of realism and liberty, Italian taste for beauty, German thoroughness and knowledge, and finally, as necessary, Dutch learning [...] I want to acquire an understanding of law making, of commerce and governance; I want to look at everything from the perspective of politics, the state and finance, pleasure, character and responsibilities, and everything that can contribute to making people here [=Livonia] happy, that shall be my first purpose. (Herder, 2011 [1769], Chapter 3)

Herder was on the road for almost two years, spending longer periods in Nantes, Paris, Hamburg, Eutin, Darmstadt, and Strasbourg. His eternal problem – lack of funds – meant that his travels were neither as extensive nor as systematic as he had hoped. After the initial journey, which took him to Nantes and Paris, his travel plans became contingent on those of any patrons he could attract.

During his travels, he met two people who would shape his future: in Strasbourg he met Goethe, who first became an admirer, later a good friend and, even later, an enemy.

In Darmstadt, he met Karoline Flachsland, who later became his wife. Unusually for the time, both Herder and Flachsland wanted to marry for love and they expected spouses to be friends and companions. At a time, when marriage usually was based on dynastic and economic considerations, this was an unusual position to take. Both of them were unconventional, and entered into correspondence before they were even engaged (anyone who has ever read Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility will know how courageous but also injurious to female virtue this would have been at the time). Their letters show that Herder believed in female equality long before that idea started to gain any currency. In 1772 he wrote to Caroline:
Ein Mann muss sich, glaub ich, im Weibe sehen, so wie das Weib im Manne: dann sind sie beide gesund und ganz.

I believe a man has to see himself in the woman, just like the woman in the man: then both will be healthy and whole. (Quoted from Haux, 1988, p. 21)

For someone with neither position nor fortune to enter into a love marriage with a woman who had no fortune, either, was certainly a way of walking the talk. It also meant that Herder had to find a way to secure an income. When the position of superintendent of schools in Livonia, which he saw as his vocation, fell through, he reluctantly accepted in 1771 a relatively lowly position as court preacher in Bückeburg. Bückeburg is today a town in northern Germany; back then it was the capital of the Principality of Schaumburg-Lippe.

The Principality of Schaumburg-Lippe was one of numerous mini-states that dotted the landscape of most of what is today Germany. Each of these mini-states had its own absolutist ruler; some of these were more enlightened than others but most of them were exploitative tyrants, who tried to live up the highlife à la le Roi-Soleil, except with significantly fewer resources than the French monarchs. Herder detested them all; that he was dependent on them was the bitterness of his life.

Bückeburg was deeply provincial although the ruler was relatively enlightened and tried to improve the cultural life of his domain by bringing people such as Herder to the principality. He did so against the advice of his ministers who dreaded the “most outspoken freethinker” ("erklärtsten Freigeist") and warned that with Herder’s arrival “the collapse of religion” ("der Untergang der Religion") was inevitable (Kantzenbach, 1970, p. 61).
For a while Herder was despondent and his letters of his early time in Bückeburg show an unhappy, deeply dissatisfied whinger, whose ambitions and endeavours were frustrated at every turn. Caroline urged him to create a better world in his mind:

Ach leider! Daß unser Vaterland nur Phantom und Schatten unserer Väter ist! Zumal für Männer und für einen Mann, wie Du, o Herder, bist. Ach, dann muß man sich ein verborgenes Vaterland schaffen!
How unfortunate that our fatherland is only the ghost and shadow of our fathers! Particularly for men, and for a man like you, Herder. Oh well, then you have to create a hidden fatherland for yourself! (Quoted from Kantzenbach, 1970, p. 63)

Herder took this to heart and went back to his almost manic writing projects; taking inspiration from his voracious reading, his interactions with the students and parishioners in his care, and his love of nature, some of his most important publications were prepared during this period.

Even so, the gist of Bückeburg was: “Ich muss hier weg, das ist das Ja und Amen.” (“I need to get away from here, that is the key point.” (Quoted from Kantzenbach, 1970, p. 75)

After five years in Bückeburg, he succeeded. His friend Goethe had intervened on his behalf with Karl August, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, who offered Herder the position of chief clergyman and superintendent in the grand duchy. Herder was to spend the remainder of his life, interrupted only by a yearlong trip to Italy in 1788/89, in Weimar.

Karl August, too, was a relatively enlightened monarch; even so, he was an absolutist monarch and those around him had to suck up to him, to use a contemporary term. Herder found the flattery, subservience and intrigue of court circles despicable. Two years into his appointment, he had this to say about his new country:

Es ist und bleibt doch ein elend Leben, sich früh auf die hölzerne Folterbank zu spannen und unter dem alten sächsischen Dreck zu wählen. Dies Land war von jeher von Kindern und Schwachen beherrscht und eine erbärmliche Apanage der Reformation.
It is certainly a miserable life to put oneself early to the wooden torture rack and to dig in this old Saxon shit. This country has always been reigned by children and weaklings and is a miserable apanage of the Reformation. (Quoted from Kantzenbach, 1970, p. 79)

Obviously, Herder took a much more measured tone in his publications than in his private journals and letters. None of this would have passed the censor’s office; not to mention that it hardly would have kept him in office. In his publications, he often used historically or geographically distant societies, which he felt freer to criticize, to make his point.

Even so, he kept pushing the envelope. In the early phase of the French Revolution, which he unambiguously welcomed, he created a scandal by pointedly refusing to include the French monarch and aristocracy in Sunday prayers; not because they were French or cosmopolitan, as some English-language commentators seem to assume, but because they were tyrants.
Unlike Goethe and most other German intellectuals of the time, Herder never went back on his support for the French revolutionaries. When their sovereign, Grand Duke Karl August joined the War of the First Coalition against Revolutionary France, Herder was relatively outspoken against this foreign intervention; he felt the French people had a right to give themselves a new constitution without foreign intervention. His outspokenness in this matter resulted in the break with Goethe, the Weimar court and most of his friends there. As a result, he and his family spent his final years in relative isolation.

During his years as chief clergyman and superintendent in Weimar, Herder, unlike most of his contemporaries in similar positions, worked hard on the daily grit of his job. One of his many causes was the improvement of the conditions of teachers and his steady (though not particularly successful) efforts to improve their salaries and overall condition.

Despite his dedication to his day job, he kept up his prodigious writing and was a dedicated and loving father and husband. During his second decade in Weimar his health, which had never been strong, began to fail and he died in 1803 in bitterness and, as mentioned above, relative isolation. The inscription on his tombstone reads “Licht, Liebe, Leben” (“light, love, life”) – the motto he had chosen for himself from the First Epistle of John.

Now that we have a measure of the man, let’s address his supposed advocacy for bounded monolingual nations.
Was Herder monolingual?

One of the key charges that sociolinguists currently level against Herder is that he was supposedly the purveyor of an “ideology of a monoglot and monologic standard […] demand[ing] one language, one metadiscursive order, one voice […] denying the legitimacy of multiple voices and multiple languages in public discourse” (Bauman & Briggs, 2003, p. 194).

I would argue that only a modern English-centric monolingual reading of Herder’s writing can lead to this conclusion.

To begin with, no man of Herder’s time and education was monolingual. So, of course, Herder wasn’t, either. In fact, by the paltry standards of what goes for multilingualism these days, Herder was exceptionally polyglot.

His mother tongue would have been some East Prussian form of German; already as a child in Mohrungen he studied Latin, Greek and Hebrew. By the time he started teaching in Königsberg his proficiency in these languages was such that he was given tutoring jobs in all three of them, plus French. I’m unclear where he first started to learn French but one of his timetables from Königsberg shows that he set aside two hours each day for the study of French.

In Königsberg he also became friends with another prodigious language learner, the philosopher and writer Johann Georg Hamann. Hamann’s extensive repertoire included, unusually for the time, English, which he had learnt in London a few years earlier, and Arabic, which he taught himself just because he wanted to read the Quran. Hamann taught Herder English (by reading Hamlet together — how is that for a language teaching methodology?!?) and together they also devoted themselves to the study of Italian.

All these languages — Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, English, Italian — constituted some form of “learning up” if you will: these languages were considered superior to German at the time, and the hallmarks of an educated man. That Herder as an ambitious young man should devote himself to these languages is perhaps not surprising. Where his love of languages really begins to shine is with his dedication to Latvian, a language that, at the time, was considered an inferior peasant language.
Stender’s Latvian Grammar

When they met in Strasbourg, Herder recommended to Goethe a Latvian grammar he himself had used in Riga (Stender, 1761). That grammar provides some interesting evidence for ideas about language contact at the time. In the Introduction, the grammarian, Gotthard Friedrich Stender, another Baltic German Lutheran clergyman with an intense interest in the languages and cultures of the Baltics, devotes quite some detail to discussing the relationships between Latvian and other languages in the region. Stender’s assessment of the relationship between various languages is remarkably astute. In addition to the discussion of genetic relationships (for example, Latvian is not related to Estonian), he notes that Latvians and Russians learn each other’s languages easily “through interaction” (“durch den Umgang miteinander”). In contrast, he notes that this is not so with Latvian and German, which are in a hierarchical relationship:
Daß in der lettischen Sprache nunmehr so viele Wörter deutschen Ursprungs anzutreffen, das ist gar kein Wunder, weil die Letten von den Deutschen als Leibeigene beherrscht werden.

That so many words of German origin can be found in Latvian is not surprising because the Latvians are ruled as serfs by the Germans. (Stender, 1761, p. 13)

The consequence of the subjected position of Latvian means that it has not been able to develop any educated registers:

Seitdem die vormaligen Heiden in Lief- und Kurland von den Deutschen bezwungen, und zum Christen, zugleich aber auch unter das Joch gebracht worden, ist die lettische Sprache bis auf den heutigen Tag eine gemeine Baurensprache. [...] Die lettische Sprache ist eben keine reiche, dennoch aber eine deutliche, wohlklingende und zierliche Sprache [...] Since the former heathens of Livonia and Courland were subjugated by the Germans and brought to Christianity – but simultaneously under the yoke – the Latvian language has to this day remained a common peasant language. [...] The Latvian language is therefore not a rich language but nonetheless a clear, pleasant-sounding and beautiful language. (Stender, 1761, p. 17)

Stender’s specific observations about Latvian were more generally developed in Herder’s language philosophy: external domination stunts the development of a language; therefore, for people to be able to develop their full potential they need to be free from domination. This can be best achieved if nations leave each other in peace and let each nation develop organically.

With Latvian, Herder first discovered his passion for folk songs and oral poetry; and initiating and inspiring their collection constitutes one of his abiding achievements. To be able to publish his collections, he had to dedicate himself not only to language learning but also to translation. One of his best-known publications, which was titled Folk Songs in the 1778/79 edition but The Voices of Peoples in Songs in the 1807 edition is testament to his achievements as a translator. The last publication he completed before his death was, incidentally, also a translation: El Cid from Spanish.

In sum, Herder was a prodigious polyglot and language lover who achieved a high level of proficiency in a number of languages and dabbled in many others.

Did Herder hold a monoglot ideal?

Of course, being multilingual himself does not mean that he must have thought multilingualism was a good idea. He could still have been opposed to language learning in the wider population; except that he wasn’t.

We know what Herder thought about multilingualism and language education from at least two of his writings: a 1764 essay entitled “Über den Fleiß in mehreren gelehrten Sprachen” (“On Diligence in the Study of Several Learned Languages,” an English translation is available here) and his travel diary “Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769” (“Journal of my Voyage in the Year 1769,” (Herder, 2011 [1769]), which does not seem to have been translated into English).

In “On Diligence in the Study of Several Learned Languages” Herder argues for the importance of studying “two or three” foreign languages in addition to the mother tongue. His arguments are both utilitarian (commerce cannot flourish without knowledge of different languages; it is inefficient for the advancement of humanity if
knowledge only circulates within the boundaries of a given language and is not freely shared) and idealistic (knowledge of a language "expands [the] soul" and "raises up the mind").

As I've pointed out above, studying languages was not unusual at the time and all higher learning in Europe included the study of at least Latin and Greek. Part of Herder’s originality lies in the fact that he insists on diligence in the study of both foreign languages AND the mother tongue: “Our learning must shape both kinds of languages, must tie both to each other to become the bond of knowledge” (p. 33).

In the Journal he sets out his vision how this “bond of knowledge” between mother tongue and learned languages could be achieved. He begins by denouncing the contemporary practice of Latin-medium education. He concedes that Latin grammar is superior to the grammar of all other languages but goes on to vividly describe the “torture” experienced by children for who Latin is a “dead building that tortures them without providing them with any tangible benefit, without learning a language” (“das todte Gebäude, das ihm Quaal macht; ohne Materiellen Nutzen zu haben, ohne eine Sprache zu lernen”).

_Weg also das Latein! […] durch sie werden wir klug im Sprechen und schläfrig im Denken: wir reden fremder Leute Worte und entwöhnen uns eigner Gedanken._

_Therefore, away with Latin! […] it makes us clever in speech but lazy in our thoughts: we speak the words of other people and become disaccustomed to thinking for ourselves. (Herder, 2011 [1769], Chapter 5)_
Therefore, the first language in the education of children has to be their mother tongue.

However, for Herder the mother tongue is never enough. In his reform plans for the school curriculum of Livonia, he proposed three years in primary devoted exclusively to education in the mother tongue. After that, an ambitious program of language learning was to start.

Another innovation is constituted by the fact that he regarded the study of living languages superior to the study of dead languages. For Herder, there can be no doubt that the first foreign language should not be Latin but French:

*Nach der Muttersprache folgt die Französische: denn sie ist die allgemeinste und unentbehrlichste in Europa: sie ist nach unserer Denkart die gebildetste: der schöne Styl und der Ausdruck des Geschmacks ist am meisten in ihr geformt, und von ihr in andre übertragen. [...] Sie muß also nach unserer Welt unmittelbar auf die Muttersprache folgen, und vor jeder andern, selbst vor der Lateinischen vorausgehen. Ich will, daß selbst der Gelehrte besser Französisch, als Latein könne!*The mother tongue is followed by French because it is the most widely used and indispensable in Europe. We believe it to be the most educated. Beautiful style and the expression of style is most developed in French and has from there been transferred into other languages. [...] In our view French therefore has to follow immediately after the mother tongue, and precede any other languages, even Latin. I want even scholars to speak better French than Latin! (Herder, 2011 [1769], Chapter 6)
Latin would be the second foreign language in Herder’s ideal curriculum. With regard to the third foreign language, students should be given the option to choose between Greek and Italian. He does not fully commit himself whether there should be a fourth foreign language in his school: if yes, it would have to be Hebrew; maybe not much – just enough to appreciate the beauty of the original of the Old Testament.

“On Diligence in the Study of Several Learned Languages” and “Journal of my Voyage in the Year 1769” were written relatively early in Herder’s life. While some of his positions changed, the one on the importance of learning multiple languages never did. In the 1790s he reiterated his position:

_Gewöhnlich denken wir nur in der Sprache, in der wir erzogen wurden, in der wir zuerst die innigsten Gefühle empfingen, in der wir liebten, in der wir schlafend und wachend träumen. Sie ist uns die Liebste; sie ist unsres Gemüthes Sprache. Und doch hindert sie nicht, daß wir nachher nicht zehn andre, alte und neue Sprachen lernen, ihre Schönheit lieben und Früchte des Geistes aus ihnen allen sammen könnten. Ein gebildeter Mensch zu unserer Zeit muß dies thun._

_Usually, we only think in the language in which we were brought up, in which we first received the deepest feelings, in which we loved, in which we dream and day-dream. It is our favourite language, the language of our soul and mind. But it is no obstacle to later learning ten more languages, living and dead; to love their beauty and to collect fruits of the mind from them. An educated person of our time has to do that._ (Suphan, 1883, p. 336f.)

In sum, Herder insists on the primacy of the mother tongue as the first perspective on the world through which thought and learning are formed and, indeed, become possible. However, it never seems to have occurred to him that anyone might think that the mother tongue might be enough and that our education should stop there.

**Did Herder believe in bounded languages and communities?**

The picture of Herder’s views on multilingualism and linguistic diversity I have offered here is almost diametrically opposed to the one current in sociolinguistics at the moment, where Herder is assumed to have formulated the ideology of an isomorphic relationship between language and nation. Baumann and Briggs sum this view up as follows:

_The desired goal of unification rests upon discursive unity, provided by the authority of tradition and a unified adherence to the national spirit. And here too, linguistic homogeneity is a necessary condition: “One people, one fatherland, one language” (SW 18: 347). In Herder’s vision, a viable polity can only be founded on a national language resistant to the penetration of foreign tongues._ (Bauman & Briggs, 2003, p. 193f.)

There are a number of severe problems with this interpretation. To begin with, Herder is no sloganeer; and the slogan “One people, one fatherland, one language” seemed to me to sound a bit too much like “Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer!” to ring true to Herder. So, I looked it up …

The quote is from an appendix in the complete works for Herder, which offers a collection of “letters kept back and ‘cut off.’ Mostly unpublished. […] Older drafts and discarded pieces.” ["zurückbehaltene und 'abgeschnitten' Briefe. Meist ungedruckt. […] Ältere Niederschriften und ausgesonderte Stücke." (Suphan, 1883, ToC)]. If I understand this correctly, the damning slogan that now supposedly sums up Herder can thus be found somewhere in Herder’s “discarded” private notes and was first published in 1883, exactly eighty years after his death.
Even in this minor piece, it does not appear as a slogan. The text is a short report about a conversation among friends who discuss the state of disunity among the German states whose rulers abuse and backstab each other.


We were all of the opinion that, if Germany was not to become a second Poland [in the 18th century, Austria, Prussia and Russia divided Poland amongst themselves and Poland ceased to exist as a nation until after WWI], no endeavour would be more worthy than to destroy this disunity. All the weapons of persuasion and irony, the good heart and the good sense should be used to tear down the provincial idols of Dan and Bethel [a biblical reference to idol worship; 1 Kings 12: 25-33] and of delusion and conceit; and to raise up in everything the great feeling that we should be one people, of one fatherland, of one language. That through it we must honour ourselves and strive to learn from all nations without fear or favour but remain a nation in ourselves. (Suphan, 1883, p. 347)

In order to arrive at Bauman and Briggs’ interpretation, the context had to be removed and misread. One might be generous and accept that “One people, one fatherland, one language” is a fair translation of “[...] Ein Volk seyn, Eines Vaterlandes, Einer Sprache” although on the basis of the English I had assumed to find “Ein Volk, ein Vaterland, eine Sprache;” and although the customary square brackets to signal an omission are missing. More importantly, Bauman and Briggs’ interpretation renders as universal a statement that clearly is intended to only apply to the divided German states of Herder’s time. It is to overlook Herder’s general relativist stance and impute a universalist philosophy to him.

The claim that in Herder’s vision “a viable polity can only be founded on a national language resistant to the penetration of foreign tongues” is pure fantasy. While Herder did, thankfully, not use masculinist metaphors of interlanguage penetration, the very next sentence following “the slogan” points out the importance of learning from all nations without taking sides; in modern terms we might say, that “von allen Nationen unpartheisch zu lernen” asks the reader to learn widely without being ethnocentric.

The exhortation to learn widely is not unique to this passage but a recurrent theme in Herder’s writing, as we also saw in the discussion of language learning above. The key claim is the belief in the organic connectedness of all humanity in every field of human endeavour. What is particularly noteworthy here is that his insistence on the necessity to learn from others is, for an 18th century European, exceptionally “non-Eurocentric.” In his plan for the reformation of the Livonian curriculum (Journal, Chapter 4), for instance, he writes that students will always have to study French and English history. He concedes their importance but goes on to add that one cannot rest there but also needs to include the history of the Jews, the Egyptians, the Chinese, the Japanese, the Tartars, the Indians and Persians, the Arabs, the Greeks, and “the newer peoples” (“die neuern Völker”).

While Herder insists on learning from every people, language and culture with an open mind, he does object to the mixing of peoples, languages and cultures that is the result of empire. An excerpt from the Letters for the
Advancement of Humanity, which were published in the 1790s, is worth quoting at some length:

But why must peoples have effect on peoples in order to disturb each other’s peace? It is said that this is for the sake of progressively growing culture; but what a completely different thing the book of history says! […] And if through the friction between peoples there perhaps spread here this art, there that convenience, do these really compensate for the evils which the pressing of the nations upon one another produced for the victor and the vanquished? Who can depict the misery that the Greek and Roman conquests brought indirectly and directly for the circle of the earth that they encompassed? Even Christianity, as soon as it had effect on foreign peoples in the form of a state machine, oppressed them terribly; in the case of several it so mutilated their own distinctive character that not even one and a half millennia have been able to set it right. Would we not wish, for example, that the spirits of the northern peoples, of the Germans, of the Gaels, the Slavs, and so forth, might have developed without disturbance and purely out of themselves?

And what good did the crusades do for the Orient? What happiness have they brought to the coasts of the Baltic Sea? The old Prussians [an extinct people indigenous to the Baltics; IP] are destroyed; Livonians, Estonians, and Latvians in the poorest condition still now curse in their hearts their subjugators, the Germans.

What, finally, is to be said of the culture that has been brought by Spaniards, Portuguese, Englishmen, and Dutchmen to the East and West Indies, to Africa among the negroes, into the peaceful islands of the southern world? Do not all these lands, more or less, cry for revenge? All the more for revenge since they have been plunged for an incalculable time into a progressively growing corruption. All these stories lie open to view in travel descriptions; they have also in part received vocal expression in connection with the trade in negroes.

About the Spanish cruelties, about the greed of the English, about the cold impudence of the Dutch — of whom in the frenzy of the madness of conquest hero poems were written — books have been written in our time which bring them so little honor that, rather, if a European collective spirit lived elsewhere than in books, we would have to be ashamed of the crime of abusing humanity before almost all peoples of the earth. Let the land be named to which Europeans have come without having sinned against defenseless, trusting humanity, perhaps for all aeons to come, through injurious acts, through unjust wars, greed, deceit, oppression, through diseases and harmful gifts! Our part of the world must be called, not the wise, but the presumptuous, pushing, tricking part of the earth; it has not cultivated but has destroyed the shoots of peoples’ own cultures wherever and however it could.

What, generally, is a foisted, foreign culture, a formation [Bildung] that does not develop out of [a people’s] own dispositions and needs? It oppresses and deforms, or else it plunges straight into the abyss. […]

One human being, goes the saying, is for the other a wolf, a god, an angel, a devil. What are the human peoples that affect each other for each other? The negro depicts the devil as white, and the Latvian does not want to enter into heaven as soon as there are Germans there. “Why are you pouring water on my head?” said that dying slave to the missionary. “So that you enter into heaven.” “I do not want to enter into any heaven where there are whites” he spoke, turned away his face, and died. Sad history of humanity! (Forster, 2002, p. 380ff.)

It should be clear that, for Herder, it is not cultural closure per se that is desirable; what he objects to is foreign intervention. It is particularly admirable that his list of foreign oppressions can in no way be constructed as ethnocentric demanding freedom only for his own group. He does not hesitate to list Germans as oppressors of Balts and Slavs and, at the height of the Atlantic slave trade and European colonialism, he not only denounces
these injustices of foreign intervention but tries to construct his argument from the perspective of the oppressed ("the negro depicts the devil as white").

An English-centric monolingual mindset in sociolinguistics?

I believe I have shown that the current understanding in sociolinguistics of Herder as a theorist of monolingual bounded nations is simply not borne out by the evidence. Herder was a keen language learner, who argued for the importance of cultivating the mother tongue as the basis of the equally important learning of other languages so as to be able to learn from other cultures. He insisted that multilingual and multicultural learning is beneficial for the individual, the country, and for humanity if engaged in freely. If cultural and linguistic contact, on the other hand, are forced upon a people through imperial expansion he considers them a "crime of abusing humanity."

In writing this piece I have found myself in the odd position of defending a pale, stale male. As such, this rehabilitation may seem a relatively pointless exercise, particularly as it does not reflect well on our discipline that we should be arguing over the ideas of a man who died more than 200 years ago and whose lasting influence has been relatively moderate.

The reason I consider this exercise important is because it evidences a lack of academic rigour in the reception of material in languages other than English. The sociolinguistic reception of Herder is evidence for what I have elsewhere called "English-centric monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism."

Textual interpretation is ultimately the setting forth of a claim. Bauman & Briggs (2000, 2003) have set forth such a claim based on their reading of Herder, and I have here set forth a counterclaim. We've both used accepted methods of philological argument. That is how it should be.
How it should not be is that a deeply flawed interpretation is left completely untested for 16 years and immediately accepted as gospel in the field. Why did not one of those sociolinguists who are so keen to denounce “the Herderian triad” consider themselves under an obligation to actually go back to the original and arrive at their own interpretation?

Is it because we regard a critical approach as unnecessary when it comes to texts produced in languages other than English? Is it because of a hidden language ideology that texts produced in languages other than English are only objects of analysis? That the meaning of texts produced in languages other than English is somehow more transparent and that any claims about such texts are not subject to the usual tests?

If an analysis of a text (treating Herder’s writings as “a text”) in German, a major European language – and, furthermore, a text that is fully published and by an author about whom a significant body of work exists – is so uncritically accepted, what does that mean for all those analyses we read of texts (written, spoken, online, published, unpublished) in languages even further down the global linguistic hierarchy?

References


