

On Detlev Blanke: Beyond Esperanto

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On 20 August 2016, the scholarly community lost a trusted and generous friend, Detlev Blanke. For most of those familiar with his work—and surely for most readers of this journal—Detlev was widely known as an Esperantist and an Esperantologist. The fine but significant distinction between the two represents one of the hallmarks of his multifaceted contributions to the study of *Plansprachen* (“planned languages,” the alternative to “constructed languages” and “artificial languages” that he promoted so eloquently). It is also the reason that I am writing this tribute to his memory in English, neither the primary language of this journal (Esperanto) nor the language in which I communicated with Detlev (German). To me, the most salient characteristic of his tremendous contribution to this area of linguistic study and linguistic experience has been the conviction that *Plansprachen* are not just for enthusiasts, and that Esperanto has much to offer those who do not identify themselves as *samideanoj* or as members of any of the various planned-language communities. He advocated for discussion and understanding beyond these often highly-policed intellectual borders, and it was this expansive outreach that I personally most treasure in his memory.

Detlev Blanke was a name I knew very well before I had the good fortune to meet him. While working on a book about the history of language use in the natural sciences entitled *Scientific Babel* (2015), I developed a strong interest in the history of Esperanto, Ido, and other *Plansprachen*. Learning the languages and reading in the scholarship around them, I found his numerous publications on the conceptual frameworks of these experiments, and especially on the activities of chemistry Nobelist Wilhelm Ostwald (1853–1932) in the great schism between the two languages in 1907, enormously helpful. In September 2015, I moved to Berlin for a year. Within a few weeks of my arrival I received an email (in English) from Dr. Blanke about my book, which he had read carefully, focusing on my account of Ostwald. As I later came to appreciate, the communication was characteristic of many of Detlev’s wonderful qualities, which those who knew him will miss greatly: it was open and generous in interpretation; it provided rare references and citations with which I had been previously unaware; it opened new perspec-

tives on *Plansprachen*; and he had worked to render it in English, suiting his mode of writing to ease his interlocutor's comprehension. We wrote back and forth, switching to his native language, and he kindly invited me out to Lichtenberg, the eastern neighborhood in Berlin where he had lived with his wife Wera for many years.

It was the first of several such encounters over the course of my year in Germany—usually in Lichtenberg, and once at an honorary colloquium in Leipzig celebrating his birthday—where I came to know Detlev and Wera much better. Those conversations have left a deep impression on me. The primary quality that struck one about Detlev Blanke when meeting him in person was his enormous joy in conversation and exchange. This undergirded his commitment to Esperanto: it was a language to facilitate communication, and his work both in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and internationally for the language was tireless. There was seemingly no topic in the area of constructed languages or technical nomenclature—he was a devotee, *inter alia*, of the Austrian interlinguist Eugen Wüster (1898–1977), who has not received nearly the international renown he deserves—upon which he could not converse fluidly and with enormous knowledge. He was not only interested in Esperanto as a language to speak to others, he was interested in why Esperanto was so successful when so many other projects had failed to reach beyond a small circle of adherents, even after (as with Volapük) striking initial successes. His publications about the features of *Plansprachen* that make them more or less effective are truly eye-opening.

At each meeting, it was inevitable that we would retire to his study at the back of his home, a two-room structure packed to the rafters with books and files about every imaginable constructed language, cross-referenced through his hand-written card catalog system. From here, the richness of the world of interlinguistics opened up. A lifetime of scholarly devotion and expertise was embedded in those rooms, and it was a scholarship that he never stinted on sharing with anyone who was curious.

These words are insufficient to fully express my admiration for Detlev Blanke as a scholar and a person. The history of Esperanto is studded with moments of magnanimity of spirit and high aspirations, but also petty infighting and short-sightedness. Detlev was an embodiment of the former, but he did not shy away from recognizing the latter as part of the humanity of the enterprise. He embraced the entirety of Esperanto's history as the legacy that the present has received from the past. Esperanto is an amazing achievement, and understanding its implications are a matter for more than Esperantists. Detlev Blanke reached from Zamenhof's creation to help establish Esperan-

tology as an area of research, and then extended beyond that community to engage with those concerned with the history and ethics of language use more broadly. That was a gift he gave to all of us, and it is a sizable one.

Reference

Gordin, Michael D. 2015. *Scientific Babel: How Science Was Done Before and After Global English*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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