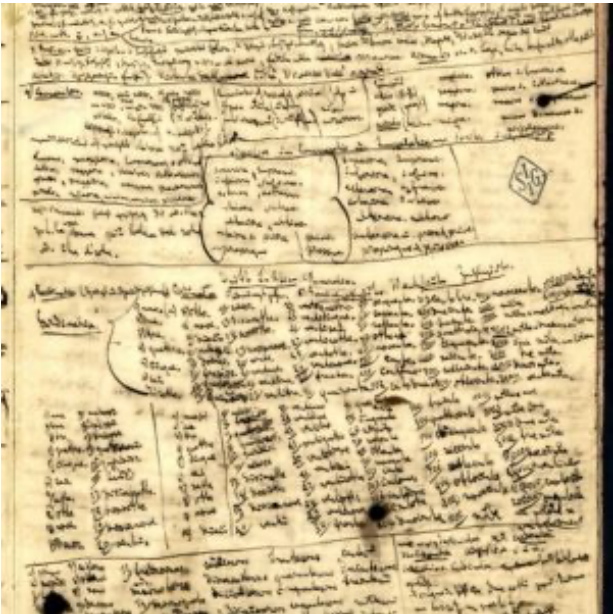


Marx and Engels as Polyglots

Kaan Kangal

Karl Marx’s 1852 work *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* opens with the famous remark that men “make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please.”¹ He goes on to argue that whatever happens in the present time arises from and is a reaction to a political past. Recollecting and interpreting the past for present purposes requires a language. Such a language is not naturally given but needs to be socially constructed. What is more, its vocabulary and grammar stem from linguistic legacies of past ideologies. Marx draws in this regard an analogy, comparing acquisition of a political language with mastering a natural language: “a beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he has assimilated the spirit of the new language and can freely express himself in it only when he finds his way in it without recalling the old and forgets his native tongue in the use of the new.”²



Notes by Marx on Italian grammar. Image credit: Kaan Kangal.

These lines were expressive of Marx’s theoretical investments in and intellectual sensibilities to the fabric of any ideological language. A master of political prose himself, Marx was well aware of the fact that any proper grasp of bourgeois societies requires a close attention to how social, economic, and political affairs are theoretically depicted, politically propagated, and linguistically articulated according to certain class interests.

¹ ↪ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 11 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 103.

² ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 104.

There was, however, also a personal dimension to the above analogy: Marx's keen interest in languages. In those lines, we hear speaking not only Marx the theorist but also Marx the polyglot. When writing that "a beginner" learns a new language by translating it "into his mother tongue," Marx was speaking from experience.

As a student under the nineteenth-century German high school (Gymnasium) curriculum, young Marx had to immerse himself in ancient Greek, Latin, and French. As part of his graduation exam (Abitur), he had to translate texts from German into French, from ancient Greek into German, and from German into Latin. In addition, he had to write a standalone article in Latin.³ In his Abitur certificate, it was noted that "in ancient languages" he showed "a very satisfactory diligence...and in French only slight diligence." In Greek and Latin, "even without preparation he translates and explains with facility and circumspection the easier passages of the classics read in the gymnasium."⁴

During his university years, he continued to practice translation. In his 1837 letter to his father, for instance, he wrote that he had "translated in part Aristotle's Rhetoric," had "translated Tacitus' Germania, Ovid's Tristia, and started learning English and Italian on my own, that is, out of grammar books, though up to now I have accomplished nothing from this."⁵ His university courses on "Mythology of the Greeks and Romans" with Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker, as well as "Questions about Homer" and "Elegiacs of Propertius" with August Wilhelm von Schlegel, required active usage of Greek and Latin.⁶ That he felt at home in ancient languages is also evident from his dissertation on the philosophies of Democritus and Epicurus. Much later, in the 1870s, Marx was to prepare excerpts from Aristotle's Metaphysics on philosophy of nature and from Diogenes Laertius on Leucippus, Epicurus, and Democritus in the Greek original for Frederick Engels's Dialectics of Nature.⁷

Marx returned to his Italian studies in 1844 or later. Using the empty pages of his notebooks on Baruch Spinoza from 1841, he prepared lengthy excerpts from Karl Ludwig Kannegießer's Italienische Grammatik [Italian Grammar], studying each and every lecture of the textbook.⁸ Kannegießer's book also consisted of reading materials from Italian writers such as Torquato Tasso, Ludovico Ariosto, Carlo Goldoni, and Pietro Metastasio. The catalog of Marx's private library (the majority of which was in French), compiled by Marx's friend and comrade Roland Daniels in 1850, suggests that Marx had the works of these four authors in the Italian original. Daniels's catalogue also documents that Marx had Niccolò Biagioli's book on Italian grammar in French translation, Giuseppe Filippo Barberi's French-Italian dictionary, Bonifacio Sotos Ochando's Grammaire complète de la langue espagnole [Complete Grammar of the Spanish Language], Adrien Berbrugger's French-Spanish dictionary, François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon's Spanish self-study book, Johann Christian Müller's Portugiesische Sprachlehre [Portuguese Language Teaching], John Perrin's The Elements of English Conversation, Johann August Jöck's Leitfaden beym Unterrichte in der Englischen [Guide to Teaching the English Language], an English-German pocket dictionary, and a complete English-German-French dictionary.⁹

³ ↪ Michael Heinrich, Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society: The Life of Marx and the Development of His Work (1818–1841), vol. 1 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019), 101.

⁴ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 1, 643.

⁵ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 1, 17.

⁶ ↪ Heinrich, Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society, 126–27.

⁷ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 25, 470–71.

⁸ ↪ Karl Marx, "Exzerpte aus Karl Ludwig Kannegießer: Italienische Grammatik," in Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), IV/5 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 651–700.

⁹ ↪ "Katalog der Bibliothek von Karl Marx. Zusammenestellt von Roland Daniels. Mit Vermerken von Karl Marx," in MEGA, IV/5, 295–306.

Marx seems to have developed an early interest in Spanish in the 1840s, but it was only in the early '50s that he systematically devoted himself to it. In 1853, he mentioned that he borrowed a concise Spanish grammar book from a friend.¹⁰ In 1854, he reported to Engels on his readings in Spanish and Italian:

At odd moments I am going in for Spanish. Have begun with Calderón.... I am reading in Spanish what I'd found impossible in French, Chateaubriand's Atala and René, and some stuff by Bernardin de St-Pierre. Am now in the middle of Don Quixote. I find that a dictionary is more necessary in Spanish than in Italian at the start. By chance I have got hold of the Archivio triennale delle cose d'Italia dall'avvenimento di Pio IX all'abbandono di Venezia [Three-year archive of Italian affairs from the time of Pius IX to the abandonment of Venice] etc. It's the best thing about the Italian revolutionary party that I have read.¹¹

Marx's immersion in Spanish helped him exploit original sources on Spain's recent political past. Focusing on the first half of the nineteenth century, he was making preparations to write a series of articles for the New York Tribune. Looking back at his preoccupation with Spanish in previous months, he wrote that "I made a timely start with Don Quixote.... At least it may be counted a step forward that at this moment one's studies are paid for."¹² One such payoff was that, in the Spanish sources, he could find ample evidence for a republican conspiracy in the French army when Napoleon was in command in Spain during the Franco-Spanish War.¹³ Much later, Spanish was going to be helpful in his studies of the colonial history of the Americas.¹⁴

It is also remarkable that around this time, Marx was already writing and publishing in English. While he had heavily relied on the French translations of English political economists in the mid-1840s in Paris, proficiency in English became an urgent matter for him in his London period in the '50s. In an 1851 letter, Engels wrote that "Marx speaks little English."¹⁵ Marx informed Engels in January 1853 that he finally "ventured for the first time to write an article in English." Friedrich Ludwig Wilhelm Pieper, a German philologist, member of the League of the Communists, and English translator of Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire, "made some corrections and, once I have a good grammar and write away gamely, I should do passablement [passably] well."¹⁶ In March 1853, he wrote to Engels that "I myself would seem to possess some talent for writing in English, if only I had a Flügel [J. G. Flügel's English-German dictionary], a grammar, and a better man than Mr. Pieper to correct my work."¹⁷ Surprised by Marx's rapid progress, Engels replied: "I would never have believed that you had sent off seven English articles in such a short space of time; when you come up here... you will learn more English in a week than in 6 weeks with Mr Pieper."¹⁸ In June 1853, Engels enthusiastically wrote to Marx: "Yesterday I read your article on The Times and the refugees (with the quotation from Dante) in an old number of the Tribune published at the beginning of April. Je t'en fais mon compliment [I congratulate you]. The English isn't merely good; it's brilliant. Every now and again there's a key word which doesn't fit in quite coulant [smoothly] enough, but that's about the worst that can be said of the article. Pieper is hardly in evidence at all and I can't conceive what you still need him for."¹⁹

¹⁰ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 39, 364.

¹¹ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 39, 447–48.

¹² ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 39, 480.

¹³ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 39, 490.

¹⁴ ↪ See, by way of comparison, Hans-Peter Harstick, ed., Karl Marx über Formen vorkapitalistischer Produktion (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1977).

¹⁵ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 38, 380.

¹⁶ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 39, 275.

¹⁷ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 39, 289.

¹⁸ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 39, 292.

¹⁹ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 39, 329–30.

Marx modestly replied that the “praise you accord to my ‘budding’ English, I find most encouraging. What I chiefly lack is first, assurance as to grammar and secondly, skill in using various secondary idioms which alone enable one to write with any pungency.”²⁰ Here, Marx was measuring his progress in English possibly against his past experience with writing and publishing in French, the best-known example of which is his 1847 pamphlet on Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Poverty of Philosophy*. Around this time, he was also attracted to comparative philology, and made excerpts from William Barnes’s 1854 book *A Philological Grammar: Grounded upon English, and Formed from a Comparison of More Than Sixty Languages*.²¹

When learning Russian in the late 1860s, he was concerned not so much with writing as with reading. In his famous 1877 letter to Otechestvenniye Zapiski, he wrote that “in order to reach an informed judgement of the economic development of contemporary Russia, I learned Russian and then spent several long years studying official publications.”²² N. Flerovskii’s work on the Russian working class was one of the first titles on his reading list. After that, he was preoccupied with Nikolay Chernyshevsky’s work on John Stuart Mill. Marx had a copy of that work in his library and also praised Chernyshevsky in the second postface to the first volume of *Capital*.²³ He also read, excerpted, and translated Chernyshevsky’s *Letters Without Address*.²⁴ Apart from Chernyshevsky and other Russian writers, Marx read a series of articles by Alexander Herzen. From Engels, he borrowed Herzen’s autobiography, *My Past and Thoughts*, in Russian. The volume contained a large number of side notes, mainly long lists of vocabulary and translations noted down by Marx and Engels.²⁵ Last but not least, Maksim Kovalevsky’s work on the history of communal property was dear to Marx (and Engels); Marx read this volume from cover to cover in the original, rendering his excerpts from the book in German.²⁶ Having witnessed Marx’s acquisition of Spanish and Russian, Wilhelm Liebknecht wrote in his reminiscences of Marx that the latter attached great importance to reading in order to master a language. “A man with a good memory—and Marx’s was of such extraordinary fidelity that it never forgot anything—quickly accumulates vocabulary and turns of phrases. Practical use is then easily learned.”²⁷ Kovalevsky himself called Marx a “polyglot,” given that he “not only fluently spoke German, English and French but could also read Russian, Italian, Spanish and Rumanian.”²⁸

In 1852, Marx tasked Pieper with preparing a sample translation of the first chapter of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. As Marx informed Engels, the “translation is swarming with mistakes and omissions. However, its correction will not be such an imposition on you as the boring task of translation.”²⁹ Engels was going to complain a few days later that “I am having a great deal of trouble over Pieper’s translation.”³⁰ A closer inspection of Pieper’s translation prompted Engels to compose a memorandum, delving into the theory and practice of translation, among other things. Here, he drew on the difference between professional translation and spontaneous writing in the target language, limitations of consulting a dictionary, dangers of disorientation in finding an appropriate style, and an exaggerated use of words of French derivation that often renders the language incomprehensible to an English native speaker. The painstaking task of the translator is to come up

²⁰ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, 331.

²¹ ↪ Marx, “Exzerpte aus William Barnes,” in MEGA, IV/12 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007), 364–66.

²² ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 24, 199.

²³ ↪ Editorial commentary, “Nikolaj Gavrilovič Černyševskij: Pis’ma bez adresa [Unveröffentlichtes Manuskript],” in MEGA, IV/18 (Berlin: De Gruyter,

²⁴ ↪ Marx, “Nikolaj Gavrilovič Černyševskij,” 705–19.

²⁵ ↪ Hanno Strauß, “Zu einigen Fragen des Studiums zeitgenössischer Verhältnisse in Rußland durch Marx und Engels in den 50er Jahren des 19. Jahrhunderts,” in *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung*,

²⁶ ↪ See Harstick, ed., *Karl Marx über Formen vorkapitalistischer Produktion*.

²⁷ ↪ Wilhelm Liebknecht, “Reminiscences of Marx,” in *Reminiscences of Marx and Engels* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), 99. According to Liebknecht, Marx also “intended to study Turkish and Arabic” during the Crimean War, but “he was not able to do so.”

²⁸ ↪ Kovalevsky, “Meetings with Marx,” in *Reminiscences of Marx and Engels*, 294.

²⁹ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, 175.

³⁰ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, 179.

with the best expressions that capture the vivid and sensuous imagery of the original text, yet also make things comprehensible for the readers.³¹

Engels's preoccupation with Pieper's mistakes also prompted him to make conceptual distinctions that directly concerned social theory rather than translation practice. He objected, for instance, to translating "bürgerliche Gesellschaft" (bourgeois society) as "middle class society." This mistake was similar to conflating "feudale Gesellschaft" (feudal society) with "nobility society." He went on:

*By Bourgeois Society, we understand that phase of social development in which the Bourgeoisie, the Middle Class, the class of industrial and commercial Capitalists, is, socially and politically, the ruling class; which is now the case more or less in all the civilised countries of Europe and America.... [Bourgeois Society refers] to the fact of the middle class being the ruling class, in opposition either to the class whose rule it superseded (the feudal nobility), or to those classes which it succeeds in keeping under its social and political dominion (the proletariat or industrial working class, the rural population...).*³²

That Marx viewed Engels as an authority in questions of translation is more than obvious. But he also knew that Engels was a polyglot in his own right, having immersed himself in more languages than Marx ever had.

Engels's school curriculum was comparable to, if not fully identical with, that of Marx. Similar to Marx, he had to learn Greek, Latin, and French, but, unlike Marx, he also took a class on Hebrew (in 1834–35). A major part of Greek courses (which he attended in 1836–37) consisted of readings from Homer's *Iliad*, Plato's *Symposium*, and Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. He seems to have read also Hesiod, Aristotle, Sophocles, and Virgil on his own and consulted a variety of sources, such as Franz Passow's *Handwörterbuch der griechischen Sprache* [Pocket Dictionary of the Greek Language], Gottlob Christian Crusius's *Vollständiges Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch Über Die Gedichte Des Homeros Und Der Homeriden* [A Complete Greek-German Lexicon of the Poems of Homer and the Homeridae], and Philipp Buttmann's *Ausführliche griechische Sprachlehre* [Extensive Teaching on the Greek Language].³³ In one of his notebooks on ancient history, Engels made excerpts on Eastern cultures, including ancient Egypt, that were accompanied by his drawings of obelisks and pyramids with imitations of hieroglyphs.³⁴

That he was enthusiastic about learning languages is evident from an 1839 letter in which he wrote, perhaps exaggeratedly, that he started reading "many newspapers—Dutch, English, American, German, Turkish and Japanese. This gave me the opportunity to learn Turkish and Japanese, so I now understand 25 languages."³⁵ But he may have heard just as many languages spoken in Friedrich Schelling's lecture hall in Berlin. Drawing on his personal observations, he wrote a short piece on the rivalry between Schelling and G. W. F. Hegel in the early 1840s, mentioning in passing the cosmopolitan character of the audience: "German, French, English, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, modern Greek and Turkish, one can hear all spoken together—then the signal for silence sounds and Schelling mounts the rostrum."³⁶

³¹ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, 190.

³² ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, 191.

³³ ↩ Editorial commentary, "Präparation und Bemerkungen zu Homers *Ilias*," MEGA, IV/1 (Berlin: Dietz, 1976), 937.

³⁴ ↩ Engels, "Geschichtsheft I. Alte Geschichte," in MEGA, IV/1, 459.

³⁵ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, 470.

³⁶ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, 182.

In the first half of 1840s, he was, thanks to his frequent visits to England, certainly proficient enough in English to write and publish on events in Prussia for *New Moral World* and *The Northern Star*. In the 1850s, he broadened his scope by adding new languages to his study plans. In April 1853, he wrote to Joseph Weydemeyer that “I have made substantial progress this past winter in Slavonic languages and military affairs and, by the end of the year, shall have a passable knowledge of Russian and South Slav.”³⁷ Just a year before that, he complained to Marx that he had failed to give due attention to Slavic languages. Russian was a particular matter of interest for Engels, not simply in order to understand “the old Slav system of communal property” but also to assume a position against Mikhail Bakunin, who “came to anything because no one knew Russian.” Furthermore, “For the past fortnight I have been swotting hard at Russian and have now got the grammar pretty well licked; in another 2–3 months I shall have acquired the necessary vocabulary, and then I shall be able to tackle something else. I must be done with the Slavonic languages this year...at least one of us should be familiar with the languages.”³⁸

Apart from Russian, Engels also pursued Serbian, Slovenian, and Czech.³⁹ He even had in mind composing a comparative grammar on Slavic languages, though he gave it up when he discovered Franz von Miklosich’s volume on that theme.⁴⁰ While up until 1852, he learned Russian as an autodidact, he took conversation classes later with the Russian immigrant Edward Pindar and went on to read Alexander Pushkin (as well as translate some sections from Eugene Onegin and *The Bronze Horseman*), Alexander Griboyedov, and Alexander Herzen in the Russian original, and prepared various lists of vocabulary accordingly. He read John Bowring’s *Specimens of the Russian Poets* and made excerpts from Russian poets and writers such as Mikhail Lomonosov, Gavril Derzhavin, and Nikolai Karamzin.⁴¹ Engels also asked Marx to search for various sources on Slavic history and philology. Marx accordingly noted down summaries and detailed bibliographies for Engels.⁴²

As for Middle Eastern languages, Engels was ambitious enough to take up Persian, though he found the difficulties of Arabic rather discouraging. In June 1853, he informed Marx that

*I have made use of the opportunity to learn Persian. I am put off by Arabic, partly by my inborn hatred of Semitic languages, partly by the impossibility of getting anywhere, without considerable expenditure of time, in so extensive a language—one which has 4,000 roots and goes back over 2,000–3,000 years. By comparison, Persian is absolute child’s play. Were it not for that damned Arabic alphabet in which every half dozen letters looks like every other half dozen and the vowels are not written, I would undertake to learn the entire grammar within 48 hours.... I have set myself a maximum of three weeks for Persian.... It is, by the way, rather pleasing to read dissolute old Hafiz in the original language...in his [Persian] grammar, old Sir William Jones likes to cite as examples dubious Persian jokes, subsequently translated into Greek verse in his *Commentariis poeseos asiaticae*, because even in Latin they seem to him too obscene. These commentaries, Jones’ Works, Vol. II, *De poesi erotica*, will amuse you. Persian prose, on the other hand, is deadly dull. E.g. the *Rauzât-us-safâ* by the noble Mirkhond, who recounts the Persian epic in very flowery but vacuous language. Of Alexander the Great, he says that the*

³⁷ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, 305. For Engels’s short list of Russian adverbs (date unknown), see the Marx-Engels Papers at the International Institute of Social History, J 62. Engels also prepared some notes on comparative philology (date unknown); for these, see H 170.

³⁸ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, 67; see also Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 44–45; Aileen Kelly, *Mikhail Bakunin: A Study in the Psychology and Politics of Utopianism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 130–31.

³⁹ ↪ See Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, 424.

⁴⁰ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 40, 403.

⁴¹ ↪ Strauß, “Zu einigen Fragen des Studiums zeitgenössischer Verhältnisse in Rußland durch Marx und Engels in den 50er Jahren des 19. Jahrhunderts,” 48–50; editorial commentary, “Friedrich Engels an Karl Marx, 18. März 1852,” in *MEGA*, III/5 (Berlin: Dietz, 1987), 666; Engels, “Zur russischen Sprache und Literatur,” in *MEGA*, IV/10 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2023), 603–44.

⁴² ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 40, 15–18, 19–21, 26.

*name Iskander, in the Ionian language, is Akshid Rus (like Iskander, a corrupt version of Alexandros); it means much the same as filusuf, which derives from fila, love, and sufa, wisdom, "Iskander" thus being synonymous with "friend of wisdom."*⁴³

Engels wrote down excerpts from Jones's *A Grammar of the Persian Language*, focusing mainly on five sections of the book (alphabet, consonants, vocals, substantives, and adjectives), and using Latin to transliterate the Persian letters in an original way.⁴⁴

The motivating factor behind Engels's interest in Persian was mainly political and historical. As he noted later in 1857, there were growing tensions between England and Russia to maintain supremacy in the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea, and East Asia, generating Persian resistance and Chinese opposition.⁴⁵ This situation required a closer grasp of local social structures and historical circumstances. In his earlier conversation with Marx back in 1853, he reported to have read Charles Forster's *The Historical Geography of Arabia*, and provided Marx with a concise summary of the book's arguments about the tribal cultures as well as the significance of religion in the East.⁴⁶ Marx replied that as "regards the Hebrews and Arabs, I found your letter most interesting" and asked: "Why does the history of the East appear as a history of religions?"⁴⁷ Engels responded that the "absence of landed property is indeed the key to the whole of the East." Thus, he wrote, "Therein lies its political and religious history. But how to explain the fact that orientals never reached the stage of landed property, not even the feudal kind? This is, I think, largely due to the climate, combined with the nature of the land, more especially the great stretches of desert extending from the Sahara right across Arabia, Persia, India and Tartary, to the highest of the Asiatic uplands. Here artificial irrigation is the first prerequisite for agriculture, and this is the responsibility either of the communes, the provinces or the central government."⁴⁸

Engels would later conceptualise such observations in the most general anthropological terms in his *Dialectics of Nature* in the 1870s, occasionally in connection with the significance of language in the evolutionary timeline of history. He proposed, for instance, to understand the origin of language in the social context of the labor process, for it is in the social production process that language figures as a medium of communication thanks to which humans can "achieve higher and higher aims." Increasing complexity of productive activity is accompanied by "the gradual development of speech" and "a corresponding refinement of...all the senses."⁴⁹

Engels's theoretical reflections on social property relations and modes of production in the 1850s were accompanied by his studies of middle and northern European history and languages. In 1859, he told Marx that he was reading at the moment Bishop Ulfilas's fourth-century Gothic translation of the Bible. He had to "polish off that damned Gothic" accordingly. "Then I shall go on to Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon.... So far I have been working without a dictionary or other reference book save the Gothic text and Grimm.... What I need badly here is Grimm's *Geschichte der deutschen*

⁴³ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, 341.

⁴⁴ ↪ The excerpts are preserved in the Russian State Archives for Social and Political History and planned to be published in MEGA, IV/11. See Zhou Sicheng, "Friedrich Engels' Studium der persischen Grammatik" in Rolf Hecker et al., eds., *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung: Neue Folge* 2014–15 (Hamburg: Argument, 2016), 68–73.

⁴⁵ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 15, 194–95, 278.

⁴⁶ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, 326–27.

⁴⁷ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, 332.

⁴⁸ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39, 339.

⁴⁹ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 456–58.

Sprache (History of German Language). Could you let me have it back?⁵⁰ In the early 1880s, he returned to the aforementioned languages, with a special focus on the Franconian dialect, in his investigations on Teutonic property relations.⁵¹

In the early 1860s, he was reading a collection of old Danish epic songs, occasionally translating from it. He sent one such translation (possibly “Herr Jon”) to his associate Carl Siebel, although he added that “I wasn’t able to do anything like justice to the lively, defiantly cheerful tone of the original...you’ll have to content yourself with the translation (almost literal, by the way). I don’t think the thing has been translated into German before.”⁵²

Shortly after the end of the German-Danish War in 1864, Engels went to Sønderborg in Schleswig, formerly part of Denmark and later annexed to Prussia, to see for himself the local circumstances at the time. In a letter where he said that he was recently “doing some work on the philology and archeology of the Frisians, Angles, Jutes, and Scandinavians,” he shared some of his observations with Marx on daily language.

In Flensburg [a Danish port until the Schleswig War], where the Danes claim that the whole of the northern part is Danish, especially by the harbour, all the children, who were playing down by the harbour there in droves, spoke Low German. On the other hand, north of Flensburg the language of the people is Danish—i.e., the Low Danish dialect, of which I hardly understood a word. The peasants in the tavern at Sundewitt, however, spoke Danish, Low German and High German by turns, and neither there nor in Sønderburg, where I always addressed the people in Danish, was I answered in any language but German.⁵³

In addition to Danish, Engels was also studying Dutch, Frisian, Celtic, and Irish by the end of the 1860s, the last one of which was particularly important to understanding older kinship relations, customs, and legal structures in northern Europe.⁵⁴

Aside from scientific studies, Marx and Engels considered polyglottery also politically useful. When discussing organisational issues of the Geneva Congress of the International Workingmen’s Association, Marx told Johann Philipp Becker in 1866 that “the General Secretary must know more than one language.” Attended by sixty delegates from Britain, France, Germany, and Switzerland, the congress needed a chairman who could “speak the various languages, simply to save time.” Marx therefore said that it is “absolutely imperative that [Hermann] Jung be made President of the congress, because he speaks the 3 languages, English, French and German.”⁵⁵

In the early 1870s, Engels was preoccupied, personally as well as organisationally, with addressing some language-related issues in the correspondence of the association. In 1871, he wrote to Paul Lafargue that “I, poor devil, have had

⁵⁰ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 40, 516.

⁵¹ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 26, 6–107.

⁵² ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 4, 160–63; vol. 41, 375, 635–37; Galina Woitenkova, “Engels’ Übersetzung eines altdänischen Liedes,” in Marx-Engels-Jahrbuch, Band 10 (1986), 334–38.

⁵³ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 42, 7–8. Engels also recommended to Marx some sources on old German. See Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 42, 554.

⁵⁴ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 43, 247, 501, 514, 516, 517–18. For Engels’s excerpts on grammar from Charles Vallancey’s A Grammar of the Iberno-Celtic, or Irish Language, see the Marx-Engels Papers at the International Institute of Social History, J 49, issg.amsterdam.

⁵⁵ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 42, 314–15.

to write long letters, one after the other, in Italian and Spanish, two languages I scarcely know!"⁵⁶ In 1872, he was involved in coordination questions and made the following suggestion:

*We intentionally did not want to have a German Secretary for Denmark; our Frenchmen do not write English for the most part and we did not know how well correspondence in French would suit you—so our only alternative was to choose an Englishman, since you had written to us in English. You will, of course, write to me in Danish. I understand your language perfectly, since I have made a thorough study of Scandinavian literature, and my only regret is that I cannot reply to you in Danish since I have never had the opportunity to practise it. Perhaps that will come later! Apart from myself, Marx understands Danish, but I doubt if anyone else does on the General Council.*⁵⁷

From the late 1860s onward, Engels returned to translations of theoretically sophisticated texts. The English and French translations of Marx's *Capital* were on Engels's schedule. He believed that Samuel Moore was the right man for the English edition, as his German was good enough "to read [Heinrich] Heine fluently and will soon work his way into your [Marx's] style" under Engels's strict supervision. One obvious difficulty of rendering *Capital* in English was Marx's dialectical style. Engels was relatedly contemplating various ways to translate Marx's "Hegelian expressions" and expected Marx to give some thoughts himself and perhaps even to rewrite the sections on commodity and money. "Are there not old pre-Baconian, pre-Lockean philosophical writings in English, in which we might be able to find material for the terminology? I have a feeling that something of that kind exists. And how about English attempts at reproducing Hegel?"⁵⁸

Engels half-jokingly said that the problem originated from Marx's own style, as Marx wrote "strictly dialectically for German science." He will, however, "fall into evil hands" when it comes not only to the English, but also the French translation of the book.⁵⁹

Going through Joseph Roy's French translation, Marx informed Nikolai Danielson, the Russian translator of *Capital*, that Roy, though "a great expert in both languages" and "a translator of Feuerbach," often translated too literally as a result of which Marx was "compelled to re-write whole passages in French, to make them palatable to the French public." Marx was confident that it will become "easier later on to translate the book from French into English and the Romance languages."⁶⁰ Engels disagreed with Marx that they should "take the French version as a model for the English translation," as the French version had its own problems. Commenting, for instance, on the French translation of the chapter on factory legislation, Engels shared his regret that the "vigor and vitality and life" of the original German "have gone to the devil."

The chance for an ordinary writer to express himself with a certain elegance has been purchased by castrating the language. It is becoming increasingly impossible to think originally in the straitjacket of modern French. Everything striking or vital is removed if only by the need, which has become essential almost everywhere, to bow to the dictates of a pedantic formal logic and change round the sentences.... In English the power of expression in the original does not

⁵⁶ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 44, 278.

⁵⁷ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 44, 330.

⁵⁸ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42, 386–88.

⁵⁹ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42, 534.

⁶⁰ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 44, 385.

need to be toned down; whatever has inevitably to be sacrificed in the genuinely dialectical passages can be made up in others by the greater energy and brevity of the English language.⁶¹

As Engels wrote much later, even “Italian is much better suited than French to the dialectical mode of presentation.” This impression was originally addressed to Pasquale Martignetti, who reached out to Engels in 1883, sending him his Italian translation of Engels’s *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Not fluent in German, Martignetti translated Engels’s text from Lafargue’s French version. Writing back to Martignetti in Italian, Engels suggested making significant changes of the Italian text, though he admitted that he was not able to render the whole piece in Italian himself, for “my Italian is imperfect and that I am out of practice.”⁶² Martignetti also asked Engels to recommend him language resources to improve his German. Given Engels’s response, Martignetti seems to be familiar with Johann Franz Ahn’s German textbook, which gave special weight to bidirectional translation (between original and target languages) of short passages rather than memorising vocabulary. Engels responded that he was not familiar with Ahn’s book but shared his own method of learning any language from scratch:

*In order to learn a language the method I have always followed is this: I do not bother with grammar (except for declensions and conjugations, and pronouns) and I read, with a dictionary, the most difficult classical author I can find. Thus I began Italian with Dante, Petrarch and Ariosto, Spanish with Cervantes and Calderon, Russian with Pushkin. Then I read newspapers, etc. For German, I think the first part of Goethe’s Faust might be suitable; it is written, for the most part, in a popular style, and the things which would seem difficult to you would also be difficult, without a commentary, for a German reader.*⁶³

The difficulties of rendering Marx’s and Engels’s German showed themselves also in the foreign editions of the *Communist Manifesto*. Since translating the text into “literary, grammatical English” is “awfully difficult,” Engels suggested doing the English translation himself. He wrote that “by far the best renderings I have seen are the Russian.”⁶⁴

To his surprise, Engels was approached by Abraham Cahan, a Russian-Jewish émigré in the United States and delegate to the International Socialist Workers’ Congress, who intended to prepare a Yiddish translation of the *Manifesto* in the 1890s, for which Engels promised to write a preface. Eleanor Marx, Marx’s youngest daughter and an activist in the Jewish labor movement in England at the time, introduced Cahan to Engels. When hosting Cahan, Engels reportedly read a few lines in Yiddish from the Jewish-American Newspaper *Arbeter Zeitung* [Workers’ Newspaper]. Cahan’s initiative was particularly pleasant to Engels, as they both condemned antisemitism and were critical of some ambiguous positions on “the Jewish question” at the Socialist Congress in 1891.⁶⁵ Already in the 1870s, Engels had attacked Eugen Dühring’s linguistic chauvinism and Judeophobia in *Anti-Dühring*.⁶⁶ It was in the context of political struggles against antisemitism that Engels considered Jewish voices particularly important:

anti-Semitism is merely the reaction of declining medieval social strata against a modern society consisting essentially of capitalists and wage-laborers, so that all it serves are reactionary ends under a purportedly socialist cloak; it is a degenerate form of feudal socialism and we can have nothing to do with that.... Thanks to anti-

⁶¹ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 44, 540–41.

⁶² ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 47, 37–38; see also 291.

⁶³ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 47, 47–48. In the late 1880s, Martignetti was considering immigrating to United States or England and consulted with Engels on questions concerning fluency in English. See Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 48, 5–7.

⁶⁴ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 47, 42.

⁶⁵ ↪ Edmund Silberner, “Friedrich Engels and the Jews,” *Jewish Social Studies* 11, no. 4 (1949): 337, 323, 339.

⁶⁶ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 103–4.

*Semitism in eastern Europe, and to the Spanish Inquisition in Turkey, there are here in England and in America thousands upon thousands of Jewish proletarians; and it is precisely, these Jewish workers who are the worst exploited and the most poverty-stricken. In England during the past twelve months we have had three strikes by Jewish workers. Are we then expected to engage in anti-Semitism in our struggle against capital?*⁶⁷

It is unknown to what extent Engels was fluent in Hebrew or Yiddish, but in his very late life, he continued pursuing still other languages, even learning new ones. As he wrote to Laura Lafargue in 1894, he was reading German, English, and Italian daily newspapers and was following various weeklies: “I receive 2 from Germany, 7 Austria, 1 France, 3 America (2 English, 1 German), 2 Italian, and 1 each in Polish, Bulgarian, Spanish and Bohemian, three of which in languages I am still gradually acquiring.”⁶⁸

In his reminiscences of Engels, Lafargue writes that shortly after the fall of the Paris Commune, he had visited the National Councils of the International in Spain and Portugal where he was told that a certain “Angel” (Engels) “wrote perfect Castilian” and “impeccable Portuguese”—“a fine achievement when one thinks of the similarities and small differences the two languages have with one another and with Italian, in which he was equally proficient.”⁶⁹

Edward Aveling recollected that Engels’s home was frequently visited by a large number of socialists from many countries: “Engels could converse with all of them in their own language. Like [Karl] Marx, he spoke and wrote German, French, and English perfectly; nearly as perfectly in Italian, Spanish, Danish, and also read, and could get along with Russian, Polish, and Romanian, not to mention such trivialities as Latin and Greek.”⁷⁰

For Marx and Engels, fluency in reading, writing, listening, or speaking seems to have never been a goal for its own sake. Keen interest in various languages, yes, but always as part of a scientific purpose and political commitment. Socialist internationalism required, and, to some extent, still requires polyglottery.

Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
- Monthly Review
- Bruce McFarlane: [Frederick Engels: The First Marxist?](#)
- John Bellamy Foster: [Marx’s Open-ended Critique](#)
- John Bellamy Foster: [Engels and the Second Foundation of Marxism](#)

⁶⁷ ↪ Engels, “On Anti-Semitism (1890),” marxists.org.

⁶⁸ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 50, 386; see also 152.

⁶⁹ ↪ Paul Lafargue, “Reminiscences of Engels,” Reminiscences of Marx and Engels, 92.

⁷⁰ ↪ Edward Aveling, “Engels at Home,” Reminiscences of Marx and Engels, 310–11.

❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

❖ **About the author: Kaan Kangal** is an associate professor at the Center for Studies of Marxist Social Theory in the Philosophy Department of Nanjing University. His work on Marx's Bonn Notebooks won the 2019 David Riazanov Prize. His most recent book is Friedrich Engels and the Dialectics of Nature (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).



❖ **About this paper:** This article was originally published in English by Monthly Review in February 2024. This paper has been published under Creative Commons, CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0. You are welcome to reproduce the material for non-commercial use, crediting the author and providing a link to the original publisher.

❖ **Quote this paper as:** Kaan Kangal: Marx and Engels as Polyglots — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, December 2024.

❖ **Tags:** Capitalism, Democracy, Biography, Marxism, Media, Socialism, Places: Global.

❖ The responsibility for opinions expressed in this work rests only with the author(s), and its publication does not necessarily constitute an endorsement by The Jus Semper Global Alliance.



Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

© 2024. The Jus Semper Global Alliance
 Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>
 e-mail: informa@jussemper.org