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**Author(s):** Korhonen, Pekka

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## 6. What is Asia? International Studies as Political Linguistics

*Pekka Korhonen* (8,063 -> 8025 words)

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I will argue that to be truly interdisciplinary, international studies needs political linguistics. This will equip this wide field to better study global and regional problems, and global-regional interactions. I will illustrate the need for political linguistics by referring to the conceptual history of Asia. The attention to and concern for the 'Rise of Asia' has been with us for some three decades now. It is without doubt the greatest change in our time facing the global system. It partly overlaps with another great global change, namely the tortuous but by and large successful development process in the whole 'Third World', including Latin America, the Middle East and Africa. Yet the changes in Asia have been the most dramatic.

While the attention to Asia is a global phenomenon, any serious student immediately faces the problem of how the meaning of the concept Asia is widely different in different regions of the world. A European might conjure up images of Turkey and Iran in connection with Asia, while for a Korean discussion of anything west of India as Asia might appear meaningless. The concept also clearly has a heavy load of historical elements in it; for instance, how meaningful nowadays, politically, as a marker of Asia

is the intra-Russian region of hills and low peaks called the Ural Mountains?

Diplomatically the concept of Asia has undergone surprising changes during the past two decades. Australian foreign policy has since the early 1990s been directed towards achieving membership of Asian regional organizations, and even the United States will become a member of the East Asian Summit in 2011, inserting itself, albeit only diplomatically, under the label 'Asian nation'. Cultural changes have been equally dramatic. During the 1980s and even in the 1990s a Mainland Chinese person was easily surprised or even offended if you called her 'Asian', but nowadays many Chinese easily see their culture as quintessentially Asian. During the past three decades Asia has turned into a global magnet that attracts media attention, innumerable foreign companies, huge amounts of capital, persistent diplomatic drives, and various kinds of students – while still remaining a concept that is obscure and in the middle of rapid changes.

From this regional variation in how the concept of Asia is used and understood follows the practical problem that Asia, and by extension, the world *cannot be understood in English*. The problem is not in this language itself; no individual human language as such would suffice for the task. There are thousands of languages in the world.

Different languages construct the world in different ways, express different cosmologies, and use concepts in a subtly or overtly different manner. To deal with this multiplicity I will introduce an interdisciplinary linguistic approach which dissolves the traditional distinction of international relations (IR) between grand theory and area studies. Research must be conducted at both levels simultaneously. This is in line with my neodisciplinary research environment at the University of Jyväskylä, where the role

of political linguistics and political theory has come centre stage while the institutional boundaries between social sciences were abolished two decades ago (for terminology, see Chapter 1). Research and teaching, at least ostensibly, but occasionally even in practice, have been interdisciplinary in various senses.

Reinhart Koselleck calls interdisciplinarity a buzzword (*Schlagwort*) in his analysis of institutional interdisciplinary experiments at the University of Bielefeld since 1968 (Koselleck 2010, 52). It is a buzzword because traditional disciplines display a tremendous centripetal pull towards disciplinary purity, not least because of inter-university and inter-national research networks and publication channels established along disciplinary lines. In this picture neo-disciplinary institutional structures also tend to an extent to lead to genuine transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary changes in action, although the agent is often an individual or group of individuals. In our case, at the University of Jyväskylä, there has been no distinction, for example, between IR and political science; from both ends research has for a long time meant ‘international studies’ in the sense that topics have been from all over the world, and national topics have regularly involved an international perspective. Even more than from other social sciences, our approach has benefited from being a victim of academic imperialism from the disciplines of philosophy, history and linguistics (cf. Long 2010). This has led to a specific type of politological research programme, where emphasis has been placed on analysing theoretical concepts, using original sources whatever the language, and concomitant emphasis on learning languages. From languages have also come linguistic theory, and interest in rhetorical and narrative analysis, i.e., understanding politics as a linguistic phenomenon.

Our neo-disciplinary research programme is directed specifically at English, because of its dominant position in IR. There is a strange and disconcerting paradox in a discipline that purports to study *international* phenomena, but preponderantly does it relying on material available in the English language and on debates conducted in English. Rather few of its practitioners bother to learn and use any foreign languages – except, of course, English, if their mother tongue is something else. Because of its global prevalence, English is a great language of international communication, this article being no exception, but exactly for the same reason it is too dominant for a hermeneutic understanding of the various political phenomena present in this world. Only a minuscule portion of the inhabitants of this world speak English as their mother tongue. For these reasons it is important to add to the ideas of multi-, trans- and neo-disciplinarity the idea of a plurilingual understanding of the world. So I will introduce my approach in two steps. First, I conceptualize international studies as the study of arguments and use of language in a world political space. Second, I develop a more precise linguistic taxonomy by which to approach the problem of metalanguage.

### **International Studies Conceptualized as World Politics**

*World politics* is a new term that has been used increasingly since the end of the Cold War as an alternative to international relations. The main problem with international relations as a concept is that it carries within it a cosmology dating from European legal discussions during the eighteenth century, when the formation of the modern nation-state was at its absolutist monarchic stage. This situation strongly influenced the way the state system was understood. Probably the first person to use the term ‘international’ – in its Latin form *inter gentes* – was the English lawyer Richard Zouche in

the title of his book *Juris et Judiciis Feccialis, sive Juris inter Gentes* (1650) (Roschin 2009, 131), but this seems to have been an isolated event. The next was the German philosopher Christian Wolff in 1749 in his legal treatise *Jus Gentium Methodo Scientifica Pertractatum* (ibid. 146). He did this while mounting an argument on the existence of international society. He presented humans as social beings, who naturally form societies, which then grow into nations, and further are unified into states. Wolff regarded these unified states as a kind of individual, and just as there existed a society between human beings (*inter homines*), there also had to exist a society between nations (*inter gentes*) (Wolff 1749: Prolegomena §7). The term appeared only in passing in this homological argument, but very soon there followed conscious attempts to use it in nominalistic reinterpretations of the system of laws between states. The first of these was made by Henri-François d'Aguesseau, who was Chancellor of France thrice 1717—50:

[... ] ce que l'on doit nommer proprement *le Droit des Gens (Jus Gentium)*, le Droit des Nations, qu'il seroit peut-être encore mieux d'appeller *le Droit entre les Nations (Jus inter Gentes)* (d'Aguesseau 1759: 444) [...what is commonly called the Law of People (*Jus Gentium*), or the Law of Nations, would perhaps be better called the Law between Nations (*Jus inter gentes*)]

*Jus gentium* was a legal concept of the Roman Empire, used for organizing relations between Rome and foreigners. Its main applications were in relations with provincial subjects, but it did not distinguish between imperial subjects and people outside the empire; the crucial division was between legal Roman citizens and non-citizens. Within an imperial cosmology the concept denoted 'domestic' law, because imperial

boundaries were always vague, and various kinds of non-citizens wandered throughout the empire for purposes of trade, study, resettlement and diplomacy. When the concept was used unchanged a millennium later in reference to legal documents drafted between absolutist states, a sense of discrepancy between the name and its referent was understandable. Jeremy Bentham imported d'Aguesseau's idea into English in 1780, and gave it a proper justification:

The word *international*, it must be acknowledged, is a new one; though, it is hoped, sufficiently analogous and intelligible. It is calculated to express, in a more significant way, the branch of law which goes commonly under the name of the *law of nations*: an appellation so uncharacteristic, that, were it not for the force of custom, it would seem rather to refer to internal jurisprudence (Bentham 1780: note 143)<sup>1</sup>

When the term *international* came to be used in the expression *international politics*, it denoted a situation where nation-states interact with each other through their high representatives. This type of cosmological understanding of the world can perhaps be extended from the beginning of the Westphalian era right to the end of the Cold War, although the picture becomes increasingly unempirical during the later periods. The last two decades have witnessed developments which clearly call for a conceptual redescription of the situation. I shall continue using the term *international studies* in this chapter, in recognition of its role in marking the interdisciplinary field of interest shared in this collection, but simultaneously wish to point out how the term international often continues to be used due to mere 'force of custom', as Bentham commented in a similar

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<sup>1</sup> Bentham makes a slightly erroneous reference to d'Aguesseau; this is rectified by editor Philip Schofield in Bentham (2010: 18, note 4).

linguistic situation. It is time to act like d'Aguesseau and choose a new term. I would suggest *world politics* as a suitable new term, in the sense that the world has now achieved the rudimentary characteristics of a common polity.

However, world politics would not refer to the idea of a maximal space of human interaction in terms of size, but rather to the fact that various types of actors now interact alongside states within the world political space; individuals, a wide variety of non-state organizations, and a number of interstate organizations. In a sense this is a continuation of the discussion on transnational politics started by Karl Kaiser in 1969 with his article 'Transnationale Politik', followed then by works such as Robert O. Keohane's and Joseph S. Nye's *Transnational Relations and World Politics* in 1971. Notwithstanding, the idea here is not to try to classify organizations, but rather to reformulate the issue from the point of view of political linguistics. Seeing the totality from the point of linguistic action would do away with the problem inherent in defining the world as a maximal space where great political and economic actors do mighty things, because it would not be much different from the usual adventure narrative of great power politics. The political is closely tied to the concept of the individual, and this link should be maintained in political theorizing.

Gerald Hauser solved problems with the concept of public sphere by reconceptualizing it as rhetorical action in public space (Hauser 1998). World politics can likewise be seen as a field of human argumentation. Human beings are of necessity physically and psychologically spatial beings, situated always in specific locations, and it is not



necessary for them all to reach world wide publicity for a world policy to be able to exist. It is the totality of these linguistic interactions that creates world politics.<sup>2</sup>

In the study of political language, arguments, narratives and rhetoric in general, the concept of politics must perforce be an action-oriented concept. The main interest in this approach does not lie in the polities, namely organizations and their characteristics, but in the individuals' communicative and representative actions, regardless of what they represent: themselves as individuals, their professions or other social reference groups, or their organizations. All representatives must needs present arguments, because all public action has to be legitimized. This to a considerable extent dispels the restraining idea of national boundaries, as arguments can easily travel far and wide. An argument presented in a specific location can produce results in a far away place. This makes it possible to see the world as a political space, although still emergent and imperfect, and by no means unified. Yet it is a common political space; not organizationally, but in terms of argumentation.

This does not, of course, mean neglecting power differentials, such as the difference between big and small actors. States do not disappear from the scene, even if our attention is focused on their representatives. Notwithstanding, this approach relativizes the situation, enabling an empirically sensible view of our contemporary world. As Max Weber says in his well-known definition of power:

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<sup>2</sup> Whether this would refer to an imperial type of organization of space, reminiscent of the Roman *gens* concept, or not, is a question that will not be addressed here.

Macht bedeutet jede Chance, innerhalb einer sozialen Beziehung den eigenen Willen auch gegen Widerstreben durchzusetzen, gleichviel, worauf diese Chance beruht (Weber 1980, 28) [‘Power means any chance to push one’s will through in a social situation even against opposition, as well as what this chance is based on’]

Power is a chance within a social relationship, nothing absolute. There is nothing certain in power. As Weber himself comments on his own definition, power is an amorphous concept whose sources can never be determined for sure. All the personal characteristics of an individual and the general political constellation of the moment affect the chances of each actor to present arguments that in time may prove effective. A simplistic situation between the omnipotent? and the impotent is not recognized. All possible actors are understood to have their argumentative chances, and thus also shares in power. The world can be understood as a loose argumentative community, filled by thinner and thicker threads of social relationships. In terms of research strategy the idea is emancipatory (see Chapter 1): in studies of world politics, it is legitimate to pay attention to anybody’s arguments, because in one way or another all individuals are world political actors. No specific representatives, such as those of big states, should have a right of precedence in being listened to, studied and analysed.

Political action can be either performative or interpretative (Palonen 1993: 11). In performative action one typically positions herself as a representative of an organization, trying to push forward, more or less ingeniously, a collectively decided policy (line) within a situation of several different actors, including various constellations of cooperation and opposition. The distinction between verbal and

physical communication is most blurred here; acts of warfare or acts of development aid can both be seen as forms of argumentation. Yet physical power resources are clearly relevant in performative action. Interpretative action, for its part, is more verbal, as the idea is to change the prevailing understanding of a situation, and reconfigure it with new concepts or narratives. The argument itself, in contrast to power resources, is more important here. The distinction between performative and interpretative action may be useful when studying, e.g., the origin and spread of ideas, concepts, policies and norms of conduct. They often have an individual reinterpetative origin, have been developed further in intellectual debates, are then adopted into formal political processes, and finally disseminated through performative actions by representatives of organizations, whether those of the mass media, state machineries, or international organizations like the UN.

Such an understanding of politics dissolves the boundaries between political science, IR and linguistics, so that research on world politics is transdisciplinary. To put it provocatively: in terms of research topics and methodologies, anything goes. As Paul Feyerabend says: 'Science is an essentially anarchistic enterprise: theoretical anarchism is more humanitarian and more likely to encourage progress than its law-and-order alternatives' (1975). The researcher herself decides the format and relevance of her studies in the sense that no umbrella disciplinary programmes are needed.

### **Metalanguage in Argumentative Studies**

If anything goes, and if anybody can legitimately be studied as a worthy representative of the world, the problem will emerge that people obviously do not use words in similar ways. This means that the metalanguage we use for organizing our studies becomes a

problem. To go straight to the heart of the matter, are words such as ‘world’, ‘international’, ‘democracy’, ‘culture’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘Europe’ or ‘Asia’ and many others, *concepts, commonplaces, names, or terms*? The problem can perhaps be best operationalized by asking: in what kind of language game (Wittgenstein 2006) does the researcher place herself when she chooses any of these four appellations for linguistically managing her main object of study? There is no end to the potential research material when one attempts to understand world political phenomena as argumentation. Research material comes in a multitude of languages, and is of quite disparate quality and content, ranging from historical archival sources to speeches by present day politicians, or chance remarks by the man in the street. It is difficult to find a common conceptual denominator, such as ‘democracy’, when studying material as wide as this. Yet, all argumentation on a specific topic clearly belongs together, but in the metaphorical sense of an extended family of related meanings, rather than as a string of straightforward definitions over time. I propose a taxonomy consisting of concept, commonplace, name and term as tools with which sufficient order can be brought to the situation. Their meanings of course overlap to a considerable extent, but with them one can formulate research strategies, with which to approach various types of argumentative research material.

### *Term*

Term is the simplest tool within the taxonomy. It is used for introductory purposes, or when the idea is not to go into definitions and meanings, but simply to point out the use of some specific word. For example, above I used it in this sense when introducing the word ‘world politics’. Similarly, if we say that ‘Asia is an old geographic term’, its usage is quite clear. A term simply means a noun or a compound used in a specific

context. It is very general, it does not differentiate qualitatively, and consequently it does not force the researcher to analyse profoundly, or specify precisely. Students and inexperienced researchers sometimes try to circumvent the metalinguistic problem by not thinking about it at all, and calling everything ‘terms’. The result is merely research that is conceptually blurred, and of indifferent quality. One can notice that when an author makes extensive use of the term ‘term’ in her text, it is an indication of her being aware of the existence of the problem, but trying to escape from it. This solution leads to a passive language game, which does not produce good studies.

### *Name*

If one choose *name* for her analytical concept, one engages in a very active language game, either as a participant or as an analyst, often both. With names, one does not deal innocently only with simple proper names like Wen Jiabao or Barack Obama. Names can never be separated from the act of *naming*, and giving names is always a political activity. Names lead to questions like ‘why is one place named ‘America’, and not ‘Columbia’? Why one state is called ‘China’ in one language, ‘Σῆρες’ (Seres) in another, ‘Китай’ (Kitaj) in a third, and ‘中国’ (Zhōngguó) in a fourth?

Names are inherently rhetorical devices, used for assigning value to places, things, and objects in general. If one starts studying names, she will soon be inextricably embroiled in politics in an interesting way, and will start looking at the world from the point of view of narratives and storytelling. Proper names written with a capital letter are only one species of names; any noun or adjective can be used rhetorically as a name, so that naming something, e.g., ‘democratic’, does not actually mean describing it in an

analytical or empirical way, but rather bestowing a political narrative of (usually) positive value on that object. Language as natural language becomes an important element in the analysis of names, because the implied narratives are often different in different languages. It is easy to see this in the case of China, where the ancient Greek name ‘Σῆρες’ is derived from the mythical land of silk somewhere in the east; the Russian name comes from the Khitan empire in northern China a millennium ago, and 中国 is both a very ancient and a modern name, implying centrality in the world system. The English name ‘China’ bypasses much of the historical meanings important in many languages, although it is derived from the Chinese 秦 Qin empire two millennia ago, but this fact is seldom known.

Linguists who have conducted studies on human names in different cultures tend to point out that names are generally thought of as having a direct relationship with what they denote. The finding is the same relating both to Japanese (Plutschow 1995) and European (Wilson 1998) names. This is the basis of their political usage, because connotations colour the understanding of denotations, and leads to a constant struggle to add positive emotional connotations to the names of ‘friends’, and similarly to add negative emotional connotations to the names of ‘foes’. For instance, when a Japanese foreign minister combines very positive images with the name Asia, he is clearly acting in this manner:

Asia is now brimming with optimism. With such unshakable belief here that tomorrow will be even brighter than today, no-one can argue against the claim that ‘Asian’ is another word for ‘optimist.’ (Asō 2005)

Names are specific rhetorical tropes, namely synecdoches, and the characteristic of synecdoches is that they serve as condensed narratives (Lacey 2000). A name is a small, short symbol that can be used in all kinds of arguments, and which can be repeated a number of times without any apparent feeling of tautology. With the help of names a considerable amount of repetition can be written within a text, and repetition is one of the basic techniques of propaganda. In studies of propaganda repetition is often understood as meaning the open and apparent repetition of a simplified and exaggerated argument (Lasswell 1971). A similar but softer effect can also be achieved by the repetition of a name, while the argument is changed many times over. In that way it is possible to spin a remarkably strong web of political and cultural narratives around a name. For this reason etymological and conceptual historical studies of specific names, their meanings, connotations and contexts of use can be quite fruitful. Names can be opened like doors, taking a closer look at what has been gathered inside. For instance, in European discussions, the name of Europe is so loaded with historical and political baggage sticking to it during the past three millennia that it evokes a bundle of vague, yet powerful images, which can be used freely in constructing a multitude of usable and conflicting arguments. Similar, but carrying a historical pejorative load are the names East (Wolff 1994), the Balkans (Todorova 1997), and Asia. All of these fell into disrepute during the period of European enlightenment. In the case of 'Asia', only since the beginning of the past century have determined international efforts been initiated to make the content of Asian narratives more beautiful and positive (Korhonen 2008). Foreign Minister Asō Tarō's utterance in the quotation above is a continuation of this century-long theme, but in the rhetorically easy situation where global publicity is constantly echoing the romantic narrative of 'Asia rising'.

The specific characteristic of writing about a name is that regardless of how analytically one then does it, she cannot help adding another narrative to the existing collection of narratives. A researcher touches a narrative, and it attaches itself to her. This is because narratives take place in time, describing some sort of movement there, and analysing this represents a form of historiography. As Hayden White (1973) argues in his *Metahistory*, history writing is sensible only in the form of a specific plot; other literary modes render history meaningless.

### *Concept*

If, instead of name, one chooses concept as her analytical tool, one becomes engaged in another active language game, but this time a more philosophical one. If one is not careful, one may eventually even find herself floundering in the field of cognitive psychology. The commonsensical academic understanding of the concept of ‘concept’ comes from traditional English philosophy. Here the standard example is ‘bachelor’, which is a concept composed of two other concepts, ‘man’ and ‘unmarried’. This leads to an easy understanding of concepts as building blocks, like the Danish Lego blocks: if one knows the definition of a concept, or defines it, she can link it to other suitable concepts whose definition is exact, and so build new conceptual structures, eventually leading to the venerable goal of a ‘theory’. Concepts require a lot of thought, but this can be accomplished comfortably in the proverbial philosopher’s armchair. This activity is called conceptual analysis, which essentially means what I have been doing in this paper thus far, thinking of the definitions of specific concepts, and categorizing them according to their fields of usage (Margolis et al. 2007).



The commonsensical academic understanding of concepts easily leads to crude demands about their application. ‘You must first define your concepts before you can proceed with your analysis’ is a much reiterated adage in the mouths of commentators in conferences and seminars. It is common practice in some philosophical traditions, as well as in quantitative traditions of social sciences. Concepts are supposed to deal with classes of objects, rather than individuals, which easily leads to associating them with statistical phenomena. History, social linguistics and art studies deal more often with individual phenomena. Hence the demand for prior conceptual clarification is less frequent there, but can basically be heard anywhere when the commentator cannot think of anything better to say. Demand for conceptual clarification is also merely a rhetorical strategy, nothing more.

Anyone trying to delve deeper into the definitions of any single concept, soon finds that the commonsensical academic understanding of concepts is untenable. University libraries are full of treatises attempting to define the meanings of such basic concepts as democracy, liberty, equality, development, security, peace, time, history, art, creativity, etc., and one of the pet hobbies of philosophers is to shoot down the conceptual structures of other philosophers on grounds of conceptual inconsistencies. Human language is simply not composed of neat block-like entities. Cognitive psychology, which studies empirically the way concepts are actually used, treats concepts rather as metaphoric entities, where objects are categorized and understood by means of prototypes, family resemblances, and general *Gestalts* (Lakoff et al. 2003, 71). A concept is a field of meaning, with one or more nuclei where the meaning is more concentrated, but some of the meaning may reach far and wide to peripheral areas. Is

the nucleus of the meaning of democracy in elections, or is it *in utramque partem disputari* (arguing both sides of an issue) conducted in public? Both aspects enable participation in public opinion formation and thus decision-making. Abstract models found in political science textbooks, as well as their physical incarnations in contemporary states, such as the hereditary dictatorship in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Singaporean hereditary authoritarianism, the increasingly hereditary profession of democratic politicians in the United States and Japan, Russian plebiscite democracy, the United Kingdom as practice rather than an appellation, or the Swiss relatively direct democracy, can all in one way or another be subsumed under the concept of democracy. Classroom democracy and family democracy also belong there.

Quite often, it is not necessary to define one's concepts. It is far more important to map the field of meanings that a concept has in certain language(s) and location(s), within a given time frame. Only three norms are necessary here: 1) dictionary definitions are not to be used, except perhaps as objects of analysis; 2) established authorities are there to be read, but not to be trusted; and 3) more than one or two authors have to be consulted. For instance, if we think of two extreme ways of understanding Asia in contemporary discussions – as something beyond the eastern boundary of the European Union, and something comprising the historical Indian and Chinese cultural spheres (Korhonen 2010) – we can see that the whole idea of 'defining Asia' is beside the point (for a visual illustration, see Figure 4.1). One would only lose sight of the contemporary multidimensionality of the concept if one tried to follow some preordained definition.

Figure 4.1 Two ways of conceptualizing Asia and Europe

Of course one can also make one's own definitions, but then the researcher has to be conscious of what she is doing, namely actively participating in a language game, and resolutely formulating her own research arrangement. This active aspect can only come on top of first mapping the field of meanings of a concept, but it is often useful at this phase to add an etymological analysis in different languages. The use of various languages in research is one of the surest ways to liberate oneself from a premeditated frame of mind, and to acquire a practical understanding of the multidimensionality and relativity of the human world based on language. Approaching the original concrete meaning at the historical root of an abstract concept inevitably not only adds new nuances to it, but also tickles one's imagination, and gives one additional dimension for possible redefinitions.

Etymological analysis is most of all a heuristic technique. This approach is often associated with Søren Kierkegaard (1843) and Martin Heidegger (2006), but is not, of course, limited to them. Consider, for instance, what the etymologies of the word "concept" yield. French and English *concept*, and German *Konzept*, originate in Latin *concipere*, which means to 'take in'. Physically the consequence of *concipere* was possible pregnancy in the case of a female, while the abstracted metaphor implied taking in impressions and words, letting them incubate in one's mind into a new arrangement, finally giving birth to a new insight on the world. The present English verb *conceive* still carries both meanings, physical pregnancy and understanding. Chinese and Japanese 概念 (*gàiniàn*, *gainen*) is a composite association derived from eating one's belly full 𪗇 of delicious food 𪗇→艮, as a result of using a good measuring rod 棒 for serving the rice, which forms into a feeling of a satisfactory totality 概, and

which one then contemplates in a concentrated manner 念. German *Begriff* and Swedish *begrepp* both come from ‘grasping’ (*greifen, greppa*) something with one’s hand, from which comes the abstract meaning of comprehending something of the characteristics of the object grasped. Similarly, Finnish *käsite* comes from *käsittää*, to feel with one’s hand (*käsi*) the inside of a trap to see whether any prey has been caught. If one tries to form a conclusion of this random collection of etymologies, concepts are formed in purposeful interactions with the world, with an aim at comprehending totalities, and a period of pregnant thinking is needed for a good outcome. Concepts are teleological entities. Their origin is in practice, and they have real meaning only when put to work in practice.

### *Commonplace*

If one chooses *commonplace* as her analytical tool, one engages in a language game resembling the one with the name, but in this case one studies the rhetoric of the situation in reference to the conceptual aspect of the object rather than the narratives as such. The specific meaning of *commonplace* I am after here is the case of a concept that has become used widely in public, so that it can no longer be dealt with philosophically. It is, so to speak, out of the hands of philosophers.

*Commonplace* simply means a concept, phrase, saying, maxim, or slogan that is well known. The reason why it is a ‘place’ in English, *Gemeinplatz* in German, or *lieu commun* in French, comes from the history of classical rhetoric. Its origin is in the concept of κοινός τόπος (*koinos topos*) used by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*. In his time a common method for memorizing a great number of things was to associate them with places, such as houses along a street; things under one type of theme within one house,

other themes with other houses. For an enterprising orator the important things to memorize were of course adept sayings and maxims. When a public debate touched a specific theme, such as education, bravery in war, worship of deities, etc., the rhetor had in a certain ‘place’ in his mental street a ready collection of handy phrases to trot out in the debate. The category of well-known phrases as such also came to be referred to as a commonplace, as everyone had memorized them. Aristotle gives the following observations of the usefulness of such phrases in practical situations:

To declare a thing to be universally true when it is not is most appropriate when working up feelings of horror and indignation in our hearers [...] Even hackneyed and commonplace maxims are to be used, if they suit one’s purpose: just because they are commonplace, every one seems to agree with them, and therefore they are taken for truth. [...] One great advantage of maxims to a speaker is due to the want of intelligence in his hearers, who love to hear him succeed in expressing as a universal truth the opinions which they hold themselves about particular cases. [...] It is this simplicity that makes the uneducated more effective than the educated when addressing popular audiences – makes them, as the poets tell us, ‘charm the crowd’s ears more finely’. Educated men lay down broad general principles; uneducated men argue from common knowledge and draw obvious conclusions. (Aristotle 335-322 BCE)

Commonplaces are effective simply because they are commonplaces. Everyone gets a meaning easily when a commonplace is uttered. *Koinos topos* was translated directly to Latin as *locus communis*, becoming an elementary part of Roman rhetoric, and from there it entered the ordinary Medieval European educational curriculum, and also many contemporary European languages. The same word may be both a concept and a commonplace. For instance, ‘democracy’ works that way. It not only has a large field of

conceptual meanings, from which a researcher has to try to formulate a meaningful opinion, but it is also a word in heavy everyday usage in politics all over the world, so that billions of people have some kind of image of what it means – including many curious, dim, and totally mistaken images. Its field as a commonplace is far wider than as a concept, but its depth is shallower.

Similarly, Asia as a commonplace is in heavy usage all over the world, but the most interesting and perhaps most surprising claims of its meaning come from the area where it is most frequently used in public rhetoric nowadays. These meanings can be quite different from European or American images. If a Singaporean business professional claims that in her opinion Asia is synonymous with ASEAN, and that she could not care less about other possible candidates for inclusion, her opinion is perfectly legitimate (for this way of understanding Asia, see Figure 4.2).

#### Figure 4.2 Asia as ASEAN

This is the area this Singaporean deals with in her work, and hears in Singaporean media discussions on Asia, and this is enough for her to formulate a feeling of the word. Of course she would not call her personal usage a universal definition of Asia. It is only a way of perceiving in a personally meaningful sense an element of public discourse. A commonplace is most of all a communicative word, meaningful in contemporary everyday discourses, and thus it does not reach far back historically. Strabo and Isidori de Sevilla can be illustrative in analysing Asia as an historical concept, but they are meaningless in present day usages of Asia as a commonplace. Of course,

commonplaces have also existed in history, among them ‘civilization’ in the Enlightenment period and nineteenth century rhetoric (Duara 2001, 2004), but the analysis of commonplaces is meaningful only within discourses taking place in the same time period.

An attempt to give a practical definition to distinguish between concepts and commonplaces, might, for instance, be that concepts are to be found in university libraries, and commonplaces in speeches of politicians and in popular media. The definition tries to make the distinction on the basis of the *auditoria* of the two words: concepts are aimed at audiences that have time to read slowly and contemplate meanings in their armchairs, while commonplaces are meant for audiences listening or reading rapidly, being content with immediately obtainable images.

This leads to a further difference. However obscurely worded, concepts are aimed at common understanding. Their goal is a shared meaning between the author and the reader. Commonplaces do not require this. Their curious characteristic is that there may be little or no relation between what the speaker thinks it means, and what the listener thinks it means. Exactly for this reason they are eminently appropriate in politics, because unclear meanings are of the essence in politics. Patrick Jackson’s analysis of how the commonplace ‘West’ was used in 1945—6 to turn the Soviet Union from an ally into an enemy, and Germany from an enemy into an ally is illuminating. The meanings of the West understood by American politicians, Western German politicians, the American public, and the German public differed, but the end result of the discussion was that ‘Asia’ began to stand on the Elbe in the form of the Soviet army,

while Western Germany turned into a precious stalwart of Western Christian Civilization (Jackson 2006). Democracy, West, Asia and Europe, liberty, globalization, market forces, individual responsibility, etc. are all commonplaces, especially when they come out of the mouths politicians, and are disseminated by the media. One should treat them with care, because they are difficult to control analytically. They contain a plethora of deeper and shallower meanings, and, in addition, sometimes the meanings are important, sometimes not. Sometimes they are used to convey a specific meaning to the audience, while sometimes they are used to hide another meaning. Yet commonplaces are not necessarily used with malicious intent, and often both the rhetor and the auditorium are hardly conscious of what they really say and hear; write and read.

### **Conclusion: the Practical Meaning of International Studies as Political Linguistics**

What I have written above was written from the point of view of a researcher, as an example of how to use philosophical and linguistic tools in political analysis. The first purpose was to point out the inherent flexibility of words that we use, and the ever-changing meanings of political expressions. The empirical ground of the world on which we are used to stand on is constantly shifting, whether we then deal with meanings of Asia, taken up here for illustrative purposes, or any other issue. Any scholar, whatever her academic affiliation would be well advised to take heed of these changing meanings, even if conceptual analysis is not her main interest. The meta-analytical concepts presented here are one way of bringing clarity to attempts to understand this flexibility.



Prior to introducing this taxonomy of term, name, concept and commonplace I indicated that they do overlap and that it is possible to distinguish between them only conceptually. In real-life situations categorization of empirical material and choosing an interpretative strategy tends to be somewhat messy. Yet, they can be used in any region of the world, in all languages, for analysing all kinds of linguistic social phenomena, especially all kinds of political utterances by all participants in world politics. Their value lies in their help in choosing a meaningful research strategy. Commonplace would lead to analysing public discussions, often contemporary ones, while acknowledging that they tend to be shallow and messy. Name would direct attention to politicking with emotional symbols and narratives, while concept would point towards more profound historical and theoretical reflections on the issue. Term would not actually lead towards any research project; its usage would only imply that the issue is worth acknowledging, but not going deeper into within the specific time frame that the researcher has at the moment.

A point worth keeping in mind is that the depth of the meaning of words in arguments varies. A politician does not need to be reminded of this, because even if she has not bothered to contemplate the matter theoretically, in terms of interpretative action she soon becomes an adept practitioner of argumentation. A scholar sometimes needs to be reminded, so that she can differentiate situations where it is useful to delve deep into the philosophical meaning of concepts, and where it is enough only to notice the employment of a well-known commonplace, or to understand that potent narratives have been inserted into otherwise innocent looking utterances.

A third point is that any academic writer of international studies cannot help being a world political actor. If one uses language, one cannot either help maintaining specific meanings of words and with them certain cosmological views of the world, or reinterpreting them and thus changing the worldviews. Whether one has a large or a small immediate audience does not matter here, because one is acting in a setting of billions of other people within the shared argumentative space of the world.

If we think of the various practically relevant fields for interdisciplinary international studies presented in Chapter 1, namely (i) predictive policy relevance; (ii) visionary and normative setting of policy objectives; (iii) theoretically informed social and political criticism; and (iv) emancipatory approaches set at changing realities, linguistic political analysis is relevant to all of them, in various ways. Perhaps we can start with the academically most obvious one, (iii) theoretically informed social and political criticism, to which the analysis of names, concepts and commonplaces easily leads. Once a researcher has acquired some skill and experience in this, all the others can follow. As everything important that takes place in political communities is necessarily discussed beforehand, usually both inside and outside of the community, a student who follows argumentation usually becomes adept at offering (i) relevant predictive policy guidance and consultation regarding both her own and other political communities. A theoretically well informed politological linguist, who understands symbols, historical meanings and the emotions connected with them, is certainly able to formulate (ii) visionary and normative policy objectives, although she may also need a specific personal political passion for engaging in such an activity. Visionary politics is near (iv) emancipatory approaches set at changing realities, which belongs to all of us as an

element of our human condition. Disseminating arguments that are conducive to diminishing direct and structural violence, giving encouragement to people, and maintaining a healthy distrust of all authorities are as important things as developing new varieties of maize, curing the sick, or giving microloans to poor women.

The final point I would like to make is encouragement to learning languages. This book reminds its readers of the blessings of multi-, trans- and neo-disciplinarity, trying to show how such approaches can be put into practice to study problems of various types and magnitude. My task in this context has been to emphasize how such approaches need to be extended to fully embrace the importance of languages and linguistic tools. The world and its global and regional problems cannot be understood in English, or in any other single language. The richness of human argumentation becomes truly visible only when one is able to comprehend different ways of structuring human affairs in different languages. Too much of this has been done in English within the discipline of IR during the past half century, leading to rather uninteresting and omphalopsychotic jargon filling the pages of so many IR treatises. I hope you will do better in the future!

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