



*SILENTIUM*  
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I have given this summary a title in a language no longer to be heard (at least not in any natural way, i.e. as pronounced by native speakers) because my work in Wiko and my life in Berlin unexpectedly turned out to be driven by encroaching silence – to their even more unexpected benefit.

I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg to work on a joint project with Bill Foley, looking cross-linguistically at the roles of nouns and verbs on the deepest levels of grammar and lexicon. We had both been working along these lines for ten years or so. His interests centered on the perennially thorny question of whether Tagalog and its sister languages can be analyzed as having no noun/verb distinction at all (since most basic stems can easily be used as either noun or verb and inflected accordingly, much like the English “jump” or

“wash” or “drive” but with more and different inflectional morphology), and if so how to handle this theoretically. I had been surveying languages that had both nouns and verbs as roots but differed in which was the fundamental building block in the lexicon. For instance, in Proto-Indo-European, most lexical words have verbal roots (e.g. English “tooth”, German “Zahn”, Latin “dens”, and their cognates go back to an ancestral participle from the verb “eat”, so that a tooth is an “eater”); in modern English and most other European languages, nominal roots are more common, and in languages of the eastern Caucasus the noun-based pattern is so extreme that basic, underived verbs are a closed class that cannot be expanded (so that the elementary lexical notion “bite” is expressed with a phrasal derivative, “tooth strike”). Bill had determined that Tagalog-like part-of-speech flexibility is found in a few other languages around the Pacific Rim but is rare otherwise. I had found that native North American languages are mostly verb-based while Eurasian languages are mostly noun-based. We set out to survey more languages more rigorously and determine the geography and diachronic trajectories of noun/verb flexibility and noun-based/verb-based lexicons and trace their implications for prehistory and the settlement of the Americas. For this I needed to work out correlations with some other typological parameters, and I also needed to work out some questions of coding and interpretation in order to represent the results in distance-based, neighbor-joining phylogenetic diagrams.

I had hoped that the cross-linguistic survey could be done with a list of 80 to 100 words to be looked up and categorized as to the part of speech of the word itself and the part of speech of its basic root or stem. But we found that we needed closer to 200 words to cover major semantic fields. The work was arduous and time-consuming – about a week per language working at a normal pace, and more where additional research needed to be done on etymology, historical grammar, and synchronic grammar. Complicating the issue, word formation is neglected in most recent grammars, necessitating a search for older grammars, which predate modern linguistics and require careful interpretation. It became a race against time to try to cover enough languages to have any hope of detecting any geographical or historical pattern.

Problems struck in March. I have moderate inherited age-related hearing loss, wear a hearing aid, and had to work hard to participate meaningfully in the lunch and dinner conversations or hear lectures and questions in the high-ceilinged seminar rooms and classrooms. In March I had a two-week bout of the dizziness and tinnitus that presage another hearing drop, and when that cleared I found I had crossed some threshold: multi-conversation

situations went from difficult to impossible, seminar rooms and classrooms went from requiring effort to imposing major obstacles. Panic and a sense of urgency set in as I realized the next bout of this recurring event could put me entirely out of most human company, lectures, conferences, etc. and de facto expel me from science. My Wiko project is out of the ordinary in linguistics and will go well only if in these earlier stages I can have meaningful discussions with colleagues. At all stages it will require travel to libraries and consultations with field linguists and native speakers. I realized I have to hurry, in the short run to get this project into discussable shape and get reportable joint results together, all by the end of the Wiko term, and in general to bring all-important projects to completion or at least a state where they can be completed in isolation. I began extending my library work hours, sleeping less, exercising less, pushing harder, and foregoing the concerts, sightseeing, and museum and gallery visits I had planned. By about mid-June, with the stepped-up work pace, I had surveyed enough languages that a basic picture fell into place, confirming my expectations, fitting nicely into Bill's findings, and generally validating my understanding of how the Pacific Rim linguistic population had influenced all of Eurasia and North America. We also both found evidence that flexible lexical stems are most common in sociolinguistically isolated and low-contact languages, while in major inter-ethnic languages and lingua francas most word roots are either noun or verb. This is contrary to what has usually been assumed by linguists, but between us we have enough languages to show that it is a firm pattern. So, a big success overall, though some mopping up is still needed.

Only in the Wiko setting could all of this have been possible. Discussions with other Fellows and especially the Evolution Reading Group made me aware of the tools and methods that exist for describing spreads of innovations across populations. Colloquia, discussion groups, seminars, and conversations with other Fellows clarified many issues, and as I had hoped they generally expanded my understanding of predication, entities vs. properties, intertranslatability, perspective, and countless other relevant broader topics. I learned more about other disciplines and how their practitioners think and work than I had in four decades at my own university. As a totally unexpected boon, the colloquium series on quantum phenomena, in occasional remarks that were small asides in their own research questions, suggested the likely acoustic nature of the rare hearing problem I have in addition to general loss of acuity (timing properties and individual variation in how interference patterns in the incoming sound waves are processed could explain why a high-ceilinged small room turns all speech to hash for me while for most people it is an acoustic enhancement). So, an affliction turns into a research topic.

Compensating for the doubled work pace were many happy things that could only have happened in Wiko and in Berlin. Working with Eva von Kügelgen both in classes and individually I had the great satisfaction of talking in German about German with someone, an expert, who is sophisticated both linguistically and pedagogically and is deeply interested in what mistakes foreigners make and why. Her careful presentations on word formation improved the German survey for the project. I also had the great satisfaction of seeing my German competence expand to the point that I could use it easily for lexical research. Since I did my first few wordlist surveys in the Wiko library using its collection of bilingual dictionaries, I became aware of the consistent excellence of the Langenscheidt series, now my first choice in bilingual dictionaries (despite the garish yellow covers).

At one point, working on Chukchi (far northeastern Siberia), I wanted to see what was available on its distant sister Itelmen. A reportedly useful dictionary proved not to be available in Germany, but the ever-resourceful and ever-vigilant Wiko librarians tracked down and produced the earlier edited field dictionary that the one I sought was compiled from. Written by a 19th-century Polish ethnographer, it was a trilingual dictionary with Itelmen words glossed in Polish and Latin, enabling me to put my high-school Latin and my Slavistic training together in a way I had never anticipated. Not long before this I had given a talk in the lively and forward-looking program in international Polish studies at Viadrina University Frankfurt (Oder), further connecting to the Polish side of things, and still earlier I had had the good fortune to familiarize myself with the superb Oxford Latin Dictionary in the Wiko library – a resource I might have bypassed for a dictionary with a smaller wordlist had I done this survey at home in Berkeley. So the Wiko setting brought together what would otherwise have been very disparate threads.

Also by rare chance good fortune, the Wiko library proved to have a fine pair of bilingual dictionaries for Catalan that I had never seen (furthermore graced with attractive covers that made them a joy to use) and I was able to add this language to my general lexical typology database. A huge benefit of working in Berlin was finding the excellent and comprehensive holdings of dictionaries of Eurasian languages in the Staatsbibliothek on Potsdamer Platz.

Other pleasures were the snowy winter; the wonderful natural light in the Wiko library reading room; running in the Grunewald forest (running alone in any forest without fear for my safety would be unusual in the US); renewing ties with colleagues in various German universities; seeing a new generation of young Caucasianists, most of them

trained in Germany, growing in sophistication and emerging as leaders. It was a joy to work with the dedicated and all-knowing Wiko library staff and more generally to work in a library with such a high ratio of librarians to scholars. Another joy was the dedicated and all-knowing and ever-available IT staff and the high ratio of IT staff to Fellows. Another was the administrative staff, enormously knowledgeable, helpful, and pleasant. And again the high ratio: It was wonderful to be in an institution where there are enough staff that all of them have time to do their jobs (at my university, budget cuts have reduced administrative staff and doubled or tripled the workloads of the remaining staff beyond what is humanly possible) and everyone respects everyone as a result. The attendance of not only Fellows and Rektor but also some visitors and staff made for a level of collegiality one almost never finds in a university.

In a word, the project findings, the day-to-day quality of life, and all manner of chance good fortune in library findings and interactions with other Fellows more than outweighed the grueling pace of work and sense of urgency. Only in Wiko, only in Berlin, and only in this year could all of this have happened to come together so well. *Ex silentio serendipitas.*