



A NEW RENAISSANCE  
PETER GÄRDENFORS

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Peter Gärdenfors is Professor of Cognitive Science at Lund University and Adjunct Professor at the University of Technology, Sydney. His main current research interests are concept formation, cognitive semantics and the evolution of cognition and language. His publications include *Knowledge in Flux: Modeling the Dynamics of Epistemic States* (1988); *Conceptual Spaces* (2000); *How Homo Became Sapiens: On the Evolution of Thinking* (2003, translated into six languages); *The Dynamics of Thought* (2005); and *Geometry of Meaning: Semantics Based on Conceptual Spaces* (2014). He is a member of The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences; The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities; Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina; Academia Europaea; and a Fellow of the Cognitive Science Society. He is also a member of the Prize Committee for the Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, and Vice Chairman of the Natur & Kultur Foundation. – Address: Cognitive Science, Department of Philosophy, Lund University, Box 192, S-22100 Lund, Sweden. E-mail: Peter.Gardenfors@lucs.lu.se.

*Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?*  
Friedrich Nietzsche

The Wissenschaftskolleg is a paradise for a researcher. The services provided to the Fellows are so incredible that we have absolutely no excuse not to work (well, Berlin is seductive). The only complaint I have is that I cannot stay longer.

I have been a member of the Focus Group *Biological, Cultural and Social Origins of Language* together with Luc Steels, Holger Diessel and Dorit Bar-On. Our interactions

have been friendly and constructive. I have truly enjoyed our interdisciplinary and intensive discussion (that included a bit of Chomsky-bashing). The workshops that we organized have been very fruitful and via them I have established a number of new contacts that are useful for my research purposes. I have broadened my perspective on the evolution of language and I have learned a lot about construction grammar. Since I have been a wannabe linguist for some years now, I have benefitted a lot from Holger, who has helped me come closer to my goal by directing me to the most relevant readings and answering my sometimes naïve questions about language structures.

In terms of writing, it has been a productive year for me. I did not achieve all of what I wanted (who did?), but wrote other things instead. My objective was to write articles about the coevolution of cognition, communication and cooperation, with the long-term goal of writing a book on the topic. I completed some papers in the area that I had started writing before the Wiko period, and I began reading and planning for new articles. Then I received a couple of invitations I could not refuse, so I ended up writing more about the semantics of language instead (albeit with evolutionary connections).

The biggest intellectual surprise for me during the Wiko year was my broad and sometimes intensive interaction with the biologists. I became more engaged in the activities of the Focus Groups on *Pain* and *Colouration in Animals* than I expected and took part in their workshops with great interest. Again, I have been a wannabe biologist for many years, but now I have new friends who can help me develop these interests in directions that connect to my work on the evolution of cognition.

In the German class (thanks Eva) many of us have read the book *Berlin, Meyerbeer 26*, in which the author collects the sounds of the house where she is living. I collect smells. The muddy odour of the Koenigssee after the ice has broken. The smell of detergent from the stairs of Villa Walther. The stench from the old sewers in Mitte district. The freshness of the pines in Grunewald. The intriguing combination of sandalwood and book dust in the library of the Weiße Villa. The scent of the coffee machine in the Fellows' restaurant and of Dunja's Lebanese food. The fortified tonic water and the grill on the terrace by the Herthasee. The redolence of the robinias outside my balcony and then the sweet linden flowers ("Unter den Linden" now has richer meaning for me). And after Hassan's revolution, the cheeses!

A previous Fellow quoted a poem by Fernando Pessoa that includes the following lines:

Newton's binomial is as beautiful as the Venus de Milo.

The problem is that very few people notice.

Wiko is a place where you learn to notice – if you have not done it before. C. P. Snow argued in the 1950s that there are two cultures – the sciences and the humanities. Given the ever more pragmatic, fragmented and politically controlled organisation of science, the chasm between the cultures has widened since then. Wiko works against the division. The lunches where you, for example, end up in an intensive discussion with a biologist, a historian of science and a composer about a legal topic that has just been presented at a Tuesday colloquium are more valuable than you may realize at first. They lead to new connections between intellectual themes that would not be achieved in normal academic life. Wilhelm von Humboldt, a Berliner who emphasized the importance of *Bildung* (no proper English translation is possible), would have strongly approved of Wiko's mission. By including writers, composers and artists among the Fellows, our horizons are broadened even more.

Maybe naïvely optimistic, I believe that we will see a new renaissance where the gaps between sciences, humanities and the arts disappear. (Note that in German both sciences and humanities have always been called *Wissenschaften*.) Wiko is one of the few places that prepare the world for such a unification. If Leonardo da Vinci had been alive, he would have been a Wiko Fellow.

Now during the last weeks of the Wiko year, the Fellows are entering a stage of melancholia that will soon turn into nostalgia. Maybe without noticing it, they are sent out from Wiko as apostles for a new renaissance.