

Linguistic Diversity, Global Epistemic Injustice, and Kantian Public Reason Comments on Lu-Adler on Kant's Linguistic Orientalism

Yao Lin
New York University Shanghai

Abstract: While I find Huaping Lu-Adler's excavation of Kant's long-overlooked linguistic Orientalism both enlightening and thought-provoking, I disagree with her diagnosis of its theoretical and practical relevance. On the one hand, while I agree that Kant's positionality renders all his writings and teachings presumptively impactful, there is reason to doubt that his peculiar construction of the linguistic Oriental Other had much actual impact on his disciples. On the other hand, while I agree that the Kantian ideal of public reason is inapt for rectifying the linguistic-epistemic injustices of global knowledge production, I disagree on why it is so. In particular, I argue for a shift in theoretical and practical focuses, from linguistic biases and prejudices, to the structural epistemic constraints of linguistic diversity, as well as to other political-structural conditions shaping global knowledge production.

Building on her masterful exposé of Kant's racial thought in *Kant, Race, and Racism* (Lu-Adler 2023; hereafter KRR), Huaping Lu-Adler's (2024) "Kant on Public Reason and the Linguistic Other" (hereafter KPRLO) interrogates the theoretical and practical implications of Kant's endeavor to construct "the Oriental" as a linguistically and epistemically inferior Other. On the theoretical side, argues Lu-Adler, such construction is integral to Kant's account of public reason, which is far more inegalitarian, exclusionary and conservative than most Kant scholars have acknowledged. On the practical side, she suggests that Kant's persistent linguistic Othering of non-Western peoples has had a lasting impact on global knowledge production, as he did so from a position of power (both as a prominent scholar and as a lifelong educator) at a critical historical juncture (when the Western-supremacist worldview was being crystallized and canonized). In sum, not only did Kant help perpetuate the linguistic-epistemic injustices of global knowledge production in the first place, but his ideal of public reason is also too deeply flawed to help us envision and enact changes that root out those injustices.

Lu-Adler's excavation of Kant's long-overlooked linguistic Orientalism is both enlightening and thought-provoking. Nevertheless, I am not entirely convinced by KPRLO's diagnosis of its theoretical and practical relevance. On the one hand, while I agree with Lu-Adler that Kant's positionality renders all his writings and teachings *presumptively impactful*, there is reason to doubt that his peculiar construction of the linguistic Oriental Other had much *actual impact* on his disciples. On the other hand, while I agree with Lu-Adler that the Kantian ideal of public reason is inapt for rectifying the linguistic-epistemic injustices of global knowledge production, I disagree with her on *why* it is so. The two sections below elaborate on those two disagreements respectively.

To begin with, as Lu-Adler puts it, Kant diametrically opposes "symbolic" with "discursive" languages: symbolic languages consist only of "symbols qua sensible images," and are spoken by the Oriental peoples (such as Chinese and Indians); by contrast, discursive languages consist of "words," without which "one cannot judge or think at all," and are spoken in the West (KPRLO 11). Accordingly, whereas Westerners can reason about "concepts and rules *in abstracto*,"

Chinese and Indians can only deal with the objects of reason superficially “through images *in concreto*” and are thus “incapable of moral character properly so called” (KPRLO 13). Insofar as Kant’s account of public reason presupposes “a shared [discursive] language made of words that signify concepts,” without which one cannot make one’s thoughts universally communicable and interpretable, and insofar as Kant insists on “the absence of any such language beyond the West” (KPRLO 12), the Oriental is ineligible for the public use of reason. In addition, Kant further “warns his students not to ‘imitate [the Oriental] manner of writing’ for fear that this would cause ‘the degeneration of Occidental taste’ and ‘wrong the understanding,’ whereby the precious Occidental spirit would be ‘ruined’” (KPRLO 13).

Even back in Kant’s day (1724-1804), the assertion that the Oriental cannot comprehend concepts *in abstracto* would likely sound bizarre and far-fetched, not least because of how much the Western intelligentsia had already learned about China since Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), and how typical it was for influential German philosophers during the time, including Leibniz (1646-1716) and Wolff (1679-1754), to acknowledge and commend the capacity of Chinese thinkers to engage in abstract theorizing. Indeed, “in dismissing the Oriental language as merely symbolic and as therefore inferior, Kant was putting forward a view that he knew was uncommon and controversial” (KPRLO 10 n.9). Yet, maintains Lu-Adler, we “should not simply scrutinize [Kant’s pronouncements] as truth-apt propositions. Rather, we should see them as speech acts with an ideology-forming and world-making power, on account of Kant’s positionality in an extended network of meaning makers and social actors at a critical juncture of world history,” especially by means of his courses on geography and anthropology “offered through the end of Kant’s teaching career” (KPRLO 14). Accordingly, it “should not be difficult to *imagine the impact*” (KPRLO 14, emphasis added) of Kant’s persistent dismissal of Oriental peoples as incapable of reasoning through concepts *in abstracto*: namely, how it “*can* lead to their categorical exclusion from the sphere of public reason that the Occidental man has carved out for himself” (KPRLO 15, emphasis added).

The problem, however, is that the impact of Kant’s linguistic Orientalism being *imaginable* is not the same as it being actually *impactful*, for which KPRLO has not provided evidence. Here we might recall Lu-Adler’s answer to the question of how to make sense of Kant’s racism: “as for what he said or wrote about race, no matter how obviously they strike us as racist today, those statements would have little to no practical significance unless, *at the minimum*, he was so powerfully positioned in a nexus of social and historical relations that the statements *could* receive a significant uptake in a world of meaning makers and social actors” (KRR 105, emphases added).—While a sensible rationale, it is also an incomplete one, as it only explicates a prerequisite for statements to become practically significant. Granted, as a prominent scholar and a lifelong educator at a critical historical juncture, Kant surely passed the muster of being so powerfully positioned that all his statements, whether on race or on language, *could* receive a significant uptake among meaning makers and social actors. But again, we cannot infer from it that a certain statement of his *did* receive such an uptake. Perhaps, given Kant’s towering status, we can simply *presume* that it did, at least in the absence of preponderant counterevidence? But even so, there may still be cases where the presumption is defeated.

Kant’s view that Oriental languages are non-discursive—and that Oriental peoples are incapable of reasoning through concepts *in abstracto*—is arguably one such case. Even though Kant himself saw it as part and parcel of his racial philosophy (KRR 309-320), and even though some other parts of his racial philosophy (such as his writing and teaching on *racial classification*) might have contributed significantly, and in some aspects uniquely, to the subsequent development of scientific racism (KRR 236-237), his account of the Oriental language, perhaps too fatuous on its face, appears to have left little if any mark on the subsequent development of

either general or particular linguistics. To illustrate, consider Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), often credited as the “father of general linguistics” who built the discipline from scratch (Kwan 2001: 169). Although Humboldt was deeply influenced by Kant’s other philosophical ideas (Cassirer 2013; Slagle 1974), his theory of (the Oriental) language cannot be further apart from Kant’s.

Humboldt differentiates three ways in which the sound form of a language demarcates syntactic categories—inflection, isolation and agglutination—and hence three types of language: inflectional (e.g. Indo-European and Semitic languages), isolating (e.g. Chinese) and agglutinative (e.g. Finnish). On the one hand, he believes that inflectional languages, by offering grammatical salience (*vis-à-vis* isolating languages) and conceptual unity (*vis-à-vis* agglutinative languages), are *better instruments* than non-inflectional languages for the mental development of people (Humboldt 1999: 100-101, 230). On the other hand, he keeps cautioning that the quality of a language *does not equal* the quality of mind of its speaker (Humboldt 1999: 145, 217, 230). As Losonsky summarizes, an “imperfect language” for Humboldt only indicates that “less energy has been devoted to language,” which “can be compensated for in other ways”; for example, precisely because the grammar of Chinese is less salient, it compels its speakers to pay “a stricter attention to formal relations” and inadvertently enhances their “capacity to understand the distinction between concepts and how concepts are related” (Losonsky 2006: 99-100). This stands in sharp contrast to Kant’s view that Oriental peoples are incapable of reasoning through concepts *in abstracto* and should therefore be excluded from the sphere of public reason.

To be sure, Humboldt’s linguistic theory is not free of Western-centric biases. Nor did he convince everyone of the inadvertent benefits of speaking an isolating language. On the contrary, later scholars, both in the West and in China, continued to debate about whether certain (presumably inferior) features of the Chinese language were somehow responsible for China’s political, scientific or intellectual stagnation *vis-à-vis* the rapidly modernizing West, a contrast that became more and more conspicuous by the 19th century. But the point is, Humboldt did largely set the terms for subsequent debates, in the sense that even those who disparage the Chinese language would focus, for example, on its supposed grammatical vagueness or on its overuse of polysemy (Fang 2011; Tong 2019), instead of claiming, as Kant had done, that the Chinese language precludes the Chinese people from thinking about concepts *in abstracto*. In other words, despite linguistic Orientalism being the zeitgeist of the 19th-century West, Kant’s idiosyncratic version of linguistic Orientalism failed to get off the ground.

Could it be the case that Kant’s linguistic Orientalism was practically impactful in some *indirect* way, even if its substantive content was not widely accepted as such? After all, as Lu-Adler shows, Kant was engaging in an ambitious project of reimagining the world order and rewriting the narratives on human race and human progress, “with a manifest intent to discredit any favorite view of the Orient” (KPRLO 2), and his construction of the Oriental as a linguistically and epistemically inferior Other was particularly relevant to his revisionist historiography of philosophy, where “true philosophy” could have only originated in the West, but not in other parts of the world where the people were incapable of thinking in concepts *in abstracto* (KRR 309-320). Given that this racially exclusionary history of philosophy has since been canonized in the West and then imposed upon the rest of the world, does it not demonstrate the (indirect) impact of Kant’s linguistic Orientalism on global knowledge production?

Two things are worth noting here. First, there was an intellectual trend around mid-18th century to rewrite the history of philosophy, such that ancient Greece was identified as its place of birth and that non-Western thoughts were systemically erased from the narrative (Cantor 2022: 743-745; Park 2013: 69-95), and what Kant did, being a philosopher rather than a historian of philosophy,

was offer *rationalizations* for such efforts, rather than himself writing a history of philosophy. Second, his linguistic Orientalism was *one of the several* rationalizations he offered. As Lu-Adler remarks, Kant postulates two basic “external conditions” for “the origination of true philosophy,” namely, “political conditions that are fundamental to genuinely free thinking” and “the existence of a nonpictorial native language, which allows one to form and communicate abstract thoughts”; consequently, even if Kant had not insisted on the incapacity of Oriental peoples to think abstractly, he would have still denied their capacity for “true philosophy,” as they allegedly had never had “a secular governing body that allows and protects a public sphere where truth seekers can freely exchange ideas without fear of censor or retribution” (which Kant attributed to the alleged natural inclination of Oriental peoples towards despotism, who “do not love freedom as much” and “imagine all forms of government to be monarchical”) (KRR 309, 312, 315). Unlike his unconventional view on the Oriental language, Kant’s take on the “political conditions” of the East was much more in line with the “Oriental despotism” trope prevalent by his time (Yoon 2023). It therefore remains unclear how much impact, if at all, his idiosyncratic construction of the *linguistic* (vis-à-vis *political*) Oriental Other had in the course of real-world promulgation and reception of the revisionist history of philosophy.

2

But why, some might ask, should we care about whether Kant’s linguistic Orientalism was practically impactful or not? Personally, I do not find *backward-looking* reasons, such as “exonerating” Kant or assigning “proportionate” blame to him for the practical impact of his theory, either interesting or attractive (partly because I doubt there is any meaningful way to measure the proportionality of blameworthiness). Rather, insofar as it is worth caring about, I think (and I think Lu-Adler would agree) it is ultimately for *forward-looking* reasons, namely, for contributing to our analysis of what exactly goes wrong with the global knowledge production system and how to rectify the situation. As we have seen, amidst the zeitgeist of linguistic Orientalism, Kant’s version of linguistic Orientalism was probably one of the most egregious, so much so that it left no marks on his disciples even though he persistently preached it from a position of power at a critical historical juncture. If so, then by fixating on this particularly egregious form of linguistic Orientalism, we are likely to miss out the more important ways in which real-world global linguistic-epistemic injustices are maintained (by forces and conditions that are more “material” than “ideational” in nature) and rationalized (by various less egregious, and hence more “acceptable,” more implicit and more prevalent, forms of linguistic biases).

To illustrate, take the Kantian ideal of public reason vis-à-vis global knowledge production. According to Lu-Adler, Kant’s account of public reason is nominally egalitarian and yet substantively inegalitarian, exclusionary and conservative, as it presupposes at least two rather restrictive conditions for realizing the nominally egalitarian ideal, which most people cannot access: namely, the “scholarship condition” that sanctions the public use of reason only for scholarly truth-seeking but not for advocating real-world changes (KPRLO 6-9; McQuillan 2018), and what may be called the “discursive language” condition that precludes non-Western peoples—who Kant insists do not speak discursive languages and cannot think about concepts *in abstracto*—from entering the sphere of public reason (KPRLO 9-15). In response, however, Kant-inspired philosophers, such as Yuan Yuan (2024), would object that Kant’s own formulation of the ideal of public reason is not necessarily the most “Kantian” (that is, for them, the best) formulation of it, as Kant’s personal biases and prejudices might impede the Kantian ideal’s universalist and egalitarian promises from being fully realized. Accordingly, once we get rid of those biases and prejudices, which give rise both to the conservative “scholarship condition” and to Kant’s exclusion of the Oriental on the basis of their purported incapacity for a shared discursive language, we will arrive at a “more-Kantian-than-Kant” specification of the

ideal of public reason and wield it against the linguistic-epistemic injustices of the global knowledge production system.

Lu-Adler might disagree with Yuan on the severability of Kant's biases and prejudices from his overall theoretical approach. But here I will leave this meta-theoretical question aside. For even if Yuan is justified in detaching the Kantian ideal of public reason both from Kant's scholarship condition, and from his construction of the Oriental as having innate conceptual and linguistic deficiencies, the ideal—insofar as it is a Kantian ideal—relies on a core ideal assumption that renders it inefficacious in the necessarily non-ideal linguistic-epistemic settings of the real world. In particular, Kantians have to assume away certain inconvenient *epistemic implications of linguistic diversity* among human beings, which are practically inevitable even in the absence of linguistic biases and prejudices.

Note that this is different from saying Kantians have to assume away *the fact of linguistic diversity* per se. On the contrary, instead of assuming “the need for a *shared* language by means of which one can make one's thoughts universally communicable and interpretable” (KPRLO 10, emphasis added), Kantians assume that their ideal of public reason works as long as “people from diverse linguistic communities *in principle* can appreciate and engage with one another's intellectual contributions *via translations*” (Yuan 2024: 4, emphases added). In other words, what is assumed away here is not the fact of linguistic diversity *per se*, but the fact that, even in the absence of linguistic biases and prejudices, linguistic diversity alone is sufficient to induce *status imbalances* among languages (in relation to the sizes, influences or other attributes of the respective linguistic communities), which, even if initially innocuous, are prone to be amplified and solidified (usually through more brutal forms of political and economic domination) into structural *epistemic hegemonies* in inter-linguistic knowledge production—including structural epistemic hegemonies in translation.

Take the actual world we inhabit for example. Nowadays English has become the de facto lingua franca of global academia, a fact that undoubtedly has a lot to do with the history of British colonialism as well as with the rise of postwar American hegemony, which is itself heavily neocolonial in nature. And undoubtedly, the linguistic hegemony of English in contemporary global academia has unfairly disadvantaged non-native speakers of English (Catala 2022). At the same time, however, it is also worth noting that inter-linguistic communications are by nature costly and inhibitive, as most people (including most scholars) are not fluent in multiple languages. As a result, once a hegemonic linguistic regime is established, its establishment is all too often reconstructed and remembered as a process of “natural” selection (even if most of the time it is the result of brutal conquest or other forms of domination), and the disadvantages non-native speakers of the hegemonic language endure are all too often rationalized (even by those who hold no *linguistic bias* against non-native speakers) as a “necessary evil” for the sake of lowering linguistic barriers and improving overall communicative efficiency. This is true not only of the *global* academic community, but of various *national* communities as well. For example, while English is the lingua franca of global academia, disadvantaging most Chinese scholars who do not speak or write in English fluently, Chinese is the lingua franca of Chinese academia, disadvantaging ethnic minority scholars in China whose native languages are not Chinese.

In contrast to the Kantian *ideal* of global public reason *via translations*, translation is by nature a *non-ideal* remedy for linguistic barriers. This is so not only because the hierarchies and priorities in translation are themselves largely defined or delineated by linguistic-epistemic hegemonies (e.g. in the anglophone-hegemonic global academia, there inevitably are far more Chinese translations of English books and articles than English translations of Chinese books and articles), but also (and more fundamentally) because translation is itself part of the “blockage-brokerage

mechanism” arising from linguistic barriers (Lin 2024: 375-376).¹ Insofar as there are far more books and articles than can possibly be translated, and insofar as most people (including most scholars) do not read beyond their native languages, those who get to decide on which books and articles to translate (and on who to translate them) become linguistic-epistemic “brokers” having outsized influences on the shapes and directions of inter-linguistic public (or scholarly) discourses. Put differently, instead of the ideal of a levelled, free-roaming global sphere of public reason Kantians aspire, what translation actually gives us is a rugged linguistic-epistemic terrain consisting of quasi-insulated spheres connected through bottlenecks, where the traffics are largely controlled by a small number of linguistic-epistemic brokers. At the end of the day, the existence of linguistic barriers *qua* blockage-brokerage mechanisms is a basic *structural* feature of the inherently non-ideal reality in light of linguistic diversity, which no theory of public reason, Kantian or otherwise, can afford to assume away.

To wit, while I agree with Lu-Adler that language-based epistemic injustice in global knowledge production is “fundamentally a political-structural problem” and that the Kantian ideal of public reason is “too conservative” for the purpose of bringing about relevant changes (KPRLO 18), I disagree with her on *why* this is the case. As I have shown, Lu-Adler’s focus on Kant’s *linguistic bias* against the Oriental (as well as on his privileging of truth-seeking scholars vis-à-vis change-making activists) can be circumvented by Kantians such as Yuan, and distracts us from an *intrinsic* deficit of Kantian public reason, namely, its abstraction away from a basic *structural* feature of any epistemic world consisting of linguistic diversity, with or without linguistic biases.

Furthermore, insofar as the linguistic-epistemic injustice of global knowledge production is a “political-structural problem,” confronting *linguistic biases* does not constitute a viable solution to it—not because linguistic biases are not impactful, but because their impacts are fundamentally parasitic on preexisting power relations and other political-structural factors. Without rooting out those political-structural factors in the first place, a focus on compensating for linguistic (or other types of) biases would remain superficial at best, and could even backfire at times. For example, whereas it is indeed a bias to think (as Kant did) that Oriental peoples are *naturally inclined* towards despotism (KRR 312), or that no genuine intellectual inquiry can exist *at all* under repressive political conditions (KRR 309, 311-312), it would be an overcompensation to deny that there are important ways in which “living under an authoritarian regime that exercises powerful control over the society”—the definitive *political-structural* condition in many parts of our non-ideal world—“induces pervasive and systematic malformations of knowledge and theory, both within and outside academia” (Lin 2024: 378), the effects of which would in turn spill over to global knowledge production. Similarly, whereas we should be alert of neocolonial linguistic-epistemic biases of the global academic “core” against its “peripheries,” an eagerness to compensate for it (in the absence of *political-structural* changes to the global knowledge production system) has frequently trapped us in what I have elsewhere called “the dynamic of spectacularized postcoloniality,” at the expense of a genuinely decolonized global academia (Lin 2022: 222-225; Lin 2024: 382-385). In conclusion, not only does deemphasizing the role of linguistic bias help us pin down the intrinsic deficit of Kantian public reason, but it might also be a right step towards finding *political-structural* solutions to the linguistic-epistemic injustices of global knowledge production.

¹ To be sure, translation is but one sphere where epistemic brokerage takes place. Decisions to store and reprint some texts but not others, to prioritize the marketing of some books but not others, to canonize and teach in school some authors but not others, and so on, are all instances of epistemic brokerage that need not arise from linguistic barriers. Similarly, the epistemic effects of repressive political conditions, mentioned below, can also be construed as a distinct mechanism of epistemic brokerage (Lin 2024: 378-382).

Reference

- Cantor, Lea. 2022. “Thales—the ‘First Philosopher’? A Troubled Chapter in the Historiography of Philosophy”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30(5): 727-750.
- Cassirer, Ernst. 2013[1923]. “The Kantian Elements in Wilhelm von Humboldt’s Philosophy of Language”, in *The Warburg Years (1919-1933): Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology*, translated by S.G. Lofts. Yale University Press, pp.101-129.
- Catala, Amandine. 2022. “Academic Migration, Linguistic Justice, and Epistemic Injustice”, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 30(3): 324-346.
- Fang, Weigui [方维规]. 2011. “Language and Thought: Western Thinkers and Sinologists’ Early Views on Chinese Linguistic Structure and Their Influences” [语言与思辨——西方思想家和汉学家对汉语结构的早期思考及其影响], in *Journal of East Asian Cultural Interaction Studies, Supplement 7, Linguist Contact and Transformation: Modern Chinese Linguistic Changes and Foreign Languages* [東アジア文化交渉研究 別冊 7 言語の接触と変容: 中国語の近代的変化と外国語], Kansai University ICIS [関西大学文化交渉学教育研究拠点], pp.77-94.
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von. 1999. *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and Its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, edited by Michael Losonsky and translated by Peter Heath. Cambridge University Press.
- Kwan, Tze-wan. 2001. “Wilhelm von Humboldt on the Chinese Language: Interpretation and Reconstruction”, *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 29(2): 169-242.
- Lin, Yao. 2022. “From the Specter of Polygamy to the Spectacle of Postcoloniality: A Response to Bai on Confucianism, Liberalism, and the Same-Sex Marriage Debate”, *Politics and Religion* 15(1): 215-227.
- Lin, Yao. 2024. “Brokered Dependency, Authoritarian Malepistemization, and Spectacularized Postcoloniality: Reflections on Chinese Academia”, *American Behavioral Scientist* 68(3): 372-388.
- Losonsky, Michael. 2006. *Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lu-Adler, Huaping. 2023. *Kant, Race, and Racism: Views from Somewhere*. Oxford University Press.
- Lu-Adler, Huaping. 2024. “Kant on Public Reason and the Linguistic Other”, *Asian Journal of Philosophy* 3(47): 1-22.
- McQuillan, J. Colin. 2018. “Kant on Scholarship and the Public Use of Reason”, *Idealistic Studies* 48(1): 47-68.
- Park, Peter. 2013. *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon, 1780-1830*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Slagle, Uhlán. 1974. "The Kantian Influence on Humboldt's Linguistic Thought", *Historiographia Linguistica* 1(3): 341-350.

Tong, Qingsheng [童庆生]. 2019. *The Meaning of the Chinese Language: Philology, World Literature and Western Views of the Chinese Language* [汉语的意义：语文学、世界文学和西方汉语观], SDX Joint Publishing [三联书店].

Yoon, Kate. 2023. "Oriental Despotism and the Limits of *Doux Commerce*, from Montesquieu to Raynal", *Political Theory* 51(3): 456-480.

Yuan, Yuan. 2024. "Public Reason, Kant, and Kantians: Comments on Lu-Adler's 'Kant on Public Reason and the Linguistic Other'", *Asian Journal of Philosophy* 3 (forthcoming).