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The Debate about the Limits of Expression as a Starting Point for Literary Theory

- Patricia Kolaiti, *The Limits of Expression. Language, Literature, Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019 [£ 80,00]. ISBN: 978-1-108-41866-9.

Contrary to what the title *The Limits of Expression* might suggest, Patricia Kolaiti is not directly concerned with the limits of expression. Her **first objective** is not to develop her account of the limits, but to ›explain‹ the debate, i.e. the debate on ›effability‹ or ›expressibility‹ respectively (cf. 1). This conflict concerns the question to what extent ›it is possible [...] to make one's thoughts available to others‹ (ibid.). In Kolaiti's book, explaining the conflict means giving reasons why poets and writers in particular often take negative stances on the limits of expression. According to her, explaining this conflict provides an ›excellent starting point‹ or ›excellent vantage point‹ for two further aims:

The question of the effability of human thought itself, and the very different perspectives literary and philosophical approaches have adopted towards it, seem to offer an excellent vantage point for bringing to light a diverse range of inherited circularities that have characterised much of contemporary literary enquiry and sketching new directions for research in literary and art-theoretical study. (4)

Kolaiti's **second objective** is to lead out of the circularities and confusions of literary studies or, less judgemental but no less abstract, she is ›reconsidering pertinent literary-theoretic and art-philosophical questions‹ (11). Her **third objective** consists of developing new questions in dialogue with (quasi-) empirical disciplines (cf. 13). Additionally, it is not only her goal to pursue these three goals, but ›to pursue them in adequately theoretical, empirically and cognitively aware terms.‹ (2).

Kolaiti's book consists of 7 chapters and can be **divided into three parts**. Chapters 1–3 deal exclusively with the first objective, chapters 4–6 also pursue the second and third goals. Chapter 7 is a methodological reflection. It explicitly addresses the methodological claim connected with all three of her objectives: approaching the objectives in empirically and cognitively aware terms. In this last chapter, Kolaiti argues ›for an up-to-date, explanatory, and empirically and cognitively aware form of literary and art theorising‹ (4).

The first part of the book introduces the debate over the limits of expression and discusses two reasons for a negative take on effability. **Chapter 1** introduces the debate by distinguishing between a negative and a positive attitude towards expressibility. 'Linguistic pessimists' hold the view ›that language falls terribly short when it comes to articulating the rich and disparate contents of the human mental tapestry‹ (5). ›Linguistic optimists‹ believe (in a stronger and weaker form that are negligible here): ›Each proposition or thought can be expressed [...] by some utterance of some sentence in any natural language‹ (10). Kolaiti points to writers like Paul Celan, Virginia Woolf, Tomas Tranströmer, William Faulkner or Milan Kundera, to name a few, to say that linguistic pessimism is widespread within the literary world, especially in the 20th century. However, it is not only located there. It is also deeply rooted in our daily lives as Kolaiti highlights. Sentences like ›Words cannot express how I feel‹ or ›You should have seen the look on her face‹ are well accepted and have become common expressions. On the side of linguistic optimists, Kolaiti includes exclusively linguists and philosophers.

In chapter 1 it becomes evident that the central subject of her book, the debate about the limits of language, is not a genuine conflict for her. In the way in which Kolaiti introduces linguistic pessimism and optimism, they do not contradict each other. Her talk of a ›conflict‹, of ›tensions‹ is more rhetorical rather than identifying a real difference in opinion. One may appreciate this rhetorical lineup; I would have preferred her cutting right to the question. Namely: What are the reasons for being linguistic pessimist? Kolaiti is not explaining a conflict as she writes in her introduction. She only discusses reasons for linguistic pessimism alone, she does not consider a single one for linguistic optimism.

Chapter 2 discusses the origin of a first reason for linguistic pessimism. It starts off with a brief critique of postmodernism as a school of philosophy and literary criticism. Kolaiti takes postmodernist thinkers as a variety of linguistic pessimists with their emphasis on intertextuality and with their »calling into question whether the meaning inferred from any act of writing is within the communicator's control and intentions at all« (17 f.). Her central thesis is mainly historic in nature, only partly theoretical. She claims that behaviorism and semiotics may have contributed partly to postmodernist's linguistic pessimism:

Postmodern deconstruction merely pushed to the extreme ideas that had already become available through the emergence of semiotics [...] and the theoretical dominance of behaviourism in the life sciences for most of the twentieth century. (19)

Behaviorists, so according her basic idea, have discredited statements about the inner life beyond psychology with their criticism of ›introspection‹. For semiotics, Kolaiti holds that its limited language conception might be partly responsible for linguistic pessimism. The chapter concludes with her preferred pragmatic communication theory, which she finds in particular in Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson's Relevance Theory. On this ground, Kolaiti rejects behaviorism and semiotics as a justification for linguistic pessimism in the form of postmodernism.

As Kolaiti herself notices: »Only a small amount of linguistic pessimism can be accounted for as a backward effect of semiotic and behaviourist theoretical models« (26). It only accounts for *postmodernist* pessimists. Other forms of linguistic pessimism are excluded.

Chapter 3 gives a second reason for linguistic pessimism. In contrast to the first, it justifies the view and does not exclude folk belief. Kolaiti addresses non-conceptual representations, including, for example, perceptual and emotional states. According to her, the difficulty of translating the non-conceptual into the conceptual makes linguistic pessimism a well-founded view. In addition, the chapter contains »more thoughts« about the »curse« translating the non-conceptual (35). For example, the assumption of lexical pragmatics that there is a gap between the concept that a word communicates in a lexicon and that it communicates in a specific context. This idea allows Kolaiti to reiterate the problem: Even if we can communicate more with our words in specific contexts than those words in the lexicon mean, the words are often inadequate to express non-conceptual representations.

Kolaiti's third chapter is not directed against a certain target, e.g. such as linguistic optimists, her central thesis seems to be widely accepted. The chapter is a good elaboration and illustration of the difficulty of translating the non-conceptual into the conceptual.

The **second part of the book**, chapters 4–6, is held together by the search for a new and specific *literary* reason why writers and poets are often linguistic pessimists (cf. 45). For that reason, Kolaiti addresses the nature of literature (in all three chapters) and pursues in this sense her second objective, i.e. »reconsidering pertinent literary-theoretic and art-philosophical

questions« (11). In chapter 6, Kolaiti gives her literary-specific reason for linguistic pessimism. In Chapter 5 she raises new questions addressing her third main objective.

The main assumption of **Chapter 4** is that literary studies still have to come to realize what the collapse of »structural essentialism« really implies. In a first step, Kolaiti reiterates the arguments that she believes are responsible for the collapse of the structural understanding of literature. Then, in the second step, she shows what really follows from the failure of the structural concept of literature.

The question this chapter raises is: Why does Kolaiti confront the structural account of literature? Why not, for example, an institutional account of literature? The search for a specific literary use of language is generally considered to have failed according to Kolaiti and within the discipline.¹ The reason for discussing it seems to be that she assumes that literary studies has not yet recognized the consequences of the collapse correctly:

Literary study seems to have interpreted the failure of the poetics of language [...] as implying that literature is not essentially distinct (or in other words, that there is no essence of literature). Yet what really follows from the failure of the poetics of language is that if literature is essentially distinct, its distinctness is not down to its structure (or in other words, that if there is an essence of literature, it is not constituted by the literary text's linguistic make-up). (54)

It is hard to believe that literary scholars have interpreted the failure of the structural essentialism as implying that there is no essence of literature. What should have stopped them from seeing it? Kolaiti's assumption becomes all the more unlikely as she contradicts herself. At the beginning of the chapter, she says that only very few literary scholars have recognized that the structuralist concept of literature is essentialistic (cf. 47). If this is true, literary scholars had no chance of concluding that there is no essence in literature, because they did not even realize that structural account of literature is an essentialistic account of literature.

Chapter 4 ends by stating that the question of the essence of literature is still open. **Chapter 5** points the reader to Kolaiti's new essentialistic account of literature: »I will try to gesture towards levels beyond linguistic structure at which a distinct essence of literature might be found.« (56). The aim of the chapter is not to offer an elaborate account of the essence of literature (cf. 57). This is a project, Kolaiti wants to approach in her second book, currently in the making (cf. 74). In this chapter, she sketches her production-oriented account and locates it within the tradition of text-, author- and reader-oriented approaches. Additionally and in line with her third main objective, she points out which new interdisciplinary questions can be expected from an understanding of literature that directs the attention to the literary production (64, 72). For example:

[Q]uestions about the range and types of cognitive or other sub-abilities that make creativity in general plausible, the range and types of these sub-abilities that might occur in literary/artistic creativity, in particular, and their distribution in the human population. (64)

Kolaiti calls her account a »mentalistic or cognitive view of literature«: »A view [...] that concentrates not on artworks/literary texts per se, but on the relation between artworks/literary texts and the mental states and representations of the human agents that produce them« (66). More specifically, Kolaiti assumes (with reference to a previous work²) a distinct mental state for literature and art or its producers respectively, which she labels »artistic thought state«:

[A]rtworks and literary texts [...] are causally related to an art-specific type of relevance-yielding creative mental state in their creation, which I have termed an *artistic thought state*. Artistic thought states are psychologically real entities, and can be characterised as spontaneously caused complex mental states in which an agent who is intuitively aware of the non-trivial nature of some of her creative representations

[...] derives relevance from focusing on these representations as aesthetic objects. The art-specificity of these states is due to the fact that no product other than an artwork can be a causal output of an action-process involving such states.

It remains unclear what makes her think that there are such states (apart from her own experiences as a poet, cf. 74). Similarly, the question of what makes these states *artistic* states remains unclear. Saying that the product of these states is art does not help. Is »non-trivial« and »creative« to be understood in a specific artistic sense? How do you know that the product was caused by such a state? Is every product of an artistic thought state a work of art? Is there no room for failure once the artist is in that state? Do readers play no role in determining art at all? Kolaiti recognizes that her approach is not yet fully worked out:

Delving into the nature and cognitive machinery of artistic thought states is not directly relevant to the aims of the present analysis; my second theoretical book (currently in preparation) focuses exclusively on pinning down the cognitive and perceptual infrastructure [...] of artistic thought states and uses them as the basis for a novel theoretical account of the distinctness of the 'literary mind' and the consequent distinctness of literature and art as a ›cognitive object‹. (74)

At times, this chapter reads more like a research proposal than a finished chapter.

Chapter 6 continues asking what literature is. At first, Kolaiti turns against a view she calls ›interpretationalism‹. This view or critical tendency assumes (implicitly) that literary works only serve to communicate meanings: »With a degree of exaggeration, in the interpretationalist perspective finding the *raison d'être* [sic] of a literary work comes down to trying to answer the question of what *Die Niemandrose* means« (77). Kolaiti does not criticize this practice fundamentally in substance but faults the incomplete picture interpretationalism offers: »Literature involves 'expression' of thought but does not exhaust itself in it« (64). If literature was understood solely as communicating meanings, this understanding would neglect the aesthetic dimension of literature: »Poems [...] and more generally, artworks, are objects designed to put an audience in a certain aesthetic state« (85). Kolaiti does not define 'aesthetic state'. Instead she works with a »broad pre-theoretical understanding of an aesthetic state as a type of experience that crucially involves perception and the senses« (83). Kolaiti sums up the contrast with her title: »Literature as Meaning versus Literature as Experience«. At the end of the chapter, she uses this contrast to come back to the linguistic pessimism of poets and writers. She offers a literary-specific reason for linguistic pessimism. According to her, poet's linguistic pessimism should be understood not only as a struggle to convey meaning (cf. chapter 3), but as a struggle for conveying aesthetic experience (cf. 91–94).

Chapter 6 seems to me the strongest and most valuable. With the contrast between literature as meaning versus literature as aesthetic experience, it contains an important insight that is often overlooked within literary studies and that should trigger further research. What is the reason for the omission of aesthetic experience in interpretive practice? How is this neglect related to the difficulties outlined by Kolaiti in Chapter 3, that is translating the non-conceptual into conceptual? How could this omission be overcome? Where is the place for aesthetic experience in literary studies?

A surprising fact about this chapter is that it is not explicitly linked to the previous chapter on her cognitive view of literature. In other words, how do artistic thought states relate to aesthetic experience? There are numerous phrases in this sixth chapter that sound like an intentionalist account of literature (for example, »artworks are objects *designed* to put an audience in a certain aesthetic state« (85)). This is surprising and calls for explanation in that Kolaiti attacked Jerry Fodor's intentionalist account in the previous chapter.³ How does her account of literature avoid the »circularities of existing agency based intentionalist approaches« (75)?

Chapter 7 concludes the book with a methodological reflection. Kolaiti argues »for a »naturalistic« turn, which favours the development of new, genuinely interdisciplinary and ultimately, paradigm-revising investigative practices in literary and art-theoretical study» (94). She shows in what sense interdisciplinarity could be understood, defends interdisciplinarity against skeptics and argues positively for it. »The Four Weaknesses of Contemporary Literary Study« form the background of the chapter, namely: Interpretationalism, unquestioning acceptance of intellectual authority, lack of progress in literary theory and only adopting theories from other disciplines without generating genuinely new theoretical output« (cf. 95–101). This chapter contains a lot of diverse material on what a future »naturalistic« (94) literary study could look like. It is knowledgeable, thought-provoking and leads directly to fundamental questions about the nature of literary theory that I cannot do justice here. It deserves its own discussion within the right framework. For that reason, let me just point to Kolaiti's naturalistic project.

Conclusion: From a literary-theoretical and art-philosophical perspective *The Limits of Expression* is a rather disappointing book. Chapters 1–3 are supposed to be »an excellent vantage point« for reconsidering literary-theoretic questions but only in the sense of an introduction or of a lead to. Nothing in these chapters seems necessary to discuss the literary-theoretic topics of chapters 4–6. The second part of the book is only partially convincing. Chapter 4 on the structural concept of literature seems largely redundant since there is an agreement about its failure. Chapter 5 on Kolaiti's new cognitive concept of literature seems to be work in progress in large parts. Chapter 6 is the exception. It is both instructive and thought-provoking with its contrast between literature as meaning and literature as experience and its literary specific interpretation of linguistic pessimism. All in all, one may look forward to Kolaiti's second book, in which she aims to flesh out her essentialistic cognitive view of literature.

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Anmerkungen

¹ Cf. e.g. Tilmann Köppe and Simone Winko, *Neuere Literaturtheorien* (2. Ed.), Stuttgart/Weimar 2013, 53.

² Cf. Patricia Kolaiti, The poetic mind: A producer-oriented approach to literature and art, *Journal of Literary Semantics* 44:1 (2015), 23–44.

³ Jerry Allan Fodor, Déjà vu all over again: How Danto's aesthetics recapitulates the philosophy of mind, in: Mark Rollins (ed.), *Danto and His Critics*, Oxford 1993.

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