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## Shaping Multilingual Identity in Angelika Overath's Bilingual Romansh-

## German Poetry

Reading the opening poem of Angelika Overath's *Poesias dals prüms plets: 33 romanische Gedichte und ihre deutschen Annäherungen* (2014) stereoscopically, the eye moves backwards and forwards across the page as it negotiates the bilingual text:<sup>1</sup>

<p>Poesias: spics per la vita</p> <p>spic, m – Spickzettel vita, f – Leben, auch: Taille</p>	<p>Gedichte: Probelaufe für das Leben</p> <p>Gedichte: Hilfslinien für das Ich</p> <p>Verse: Versuche für den Ernstfall</p>
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The *en face* printing of the Romansh and German versions of each poem forces the reader onto a tightrope between two texts that are at once different and the same. The longer German version stands out alongside the noticeably shorter Romansh which, because of its position on the left-hand page, is assumed to be anterior to its opposite. Reading the Romansh through the German and both through the aid of the glossary at the bottom of the left-hand page, however, it becomes clear that in Overath's establishing poem the German *Annäherung*

<sup>1</sup> Angelika Overath, *Poesias dals prüms plets: 33 romanische Gedichte und ihre deutschen Annäherungen* (Zürich: Verlag Klaus G Renner, 2014), pp. 10-11. Further references to this collection will be made in the text. Unless stated otherwise, all references are to this edition of the collection.

moves beyond the suspected original in its scope. Here, individual poems and the process of producing poetry are presented as ‘spics’ or ‘Probeläufe’ for life, as a cheat sheet that aids the negotiation of uncharted territory and provides answers in times of need. This use of poetry and poetic practice is picked up in the second verse of the German. Here, the lines on the page are defined as ‘Hilfslinien’: guidelines printed on a blank page to aid people learning how to write. This educational reference links back to the Romansh ‘spic’ functioning as a crib sheet in schools; though here, the guidelines are provided to aid the self. This stands in relation to the opening of the German version, in which poetry is described as a ‘trial run’ for life. This aspect is picked up further with the idea of each line being a ‘Probe’, a trial or a run-through for an emergency. Within Overath’s oeuvre, then, her bilingual poetry can be recognized as a testing ground, a space for the author to practice and negotiate the shaping of a new identity in multiple languages.

As she narrates it in her literary diary *Alle Farben des Schnees* (2010), the decision to relocate took place one summer’s evening in 2005.<sup>2</sup> Overath and her husband were walking the family dog above Sent, a small Romansh-speaking community perched high in Switzerland’s Engadine Valley. With the sun reflecting off the mountains that surrounded them, they recognized a desire to move permanently to this geographically remote corner of south-eastern Switzerland. Throughout *Alle Farben des Schnees*, Overath blends autobiography and poetic prose to recall the sometimes difficult process of negotiating a space in which to belong in the community she now calls home. She does so alongside a consideration of what belonging, of what *Heimat* itself, means; a feature of the text that is

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<sup>2</sup> Angelika Overath, *Alle Farben des Schnees* (München: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 2010), p. 13. Further references to this will be made in the text.

explored in detail by Linda Shortt alongside Overath's wider literary works.<sup>3</sup> Though the linguistic composition of *Sent* meant that there was no immediate requirement for Overath to learn Romansh as a native speaker of German, a key element of this narrative of belonging in *Sent* is language. Indeed, as Shortt highlights, belonging in *Sent* is predicated on 'linguistic competencies' rather than 'birthright, bloodline or time in place'.<sup>4</sup> As Shortt identifies, an acute sense of dislocation was precipitated for Overath, however, as her lack of Romansh prohibited her feeling that she truly belonged to the village community.<sup>5</sup> For Overath, the language functioned as: '[Das] unsichtbare Sprachschild des Dorfes. Eine hauchfeine Grenze gegen die Touristen, aber auch gegen die Zuwanderer. Es ist wie im Märchen. Du mußt das Wort kennen, wenn du den Felsen öffnen willst' (*AFS*, 99). For Overath, Romansh functioned as both an invisible language barrier and as a password by which belonging could be facilitated. Beyond the literal meaning of the German 'hauchfeine Grenze' as an invisible barrier, however, its physicality and its connection to language as a bodily act is apparent: denoting the breath, the German 'Hauch' represents the very means by which language is enacted and life sustained. Gaining access to the village community through language, therefore, is a bodily act that strikes at the heart of what it means to be human.

In this article I address Overath's *Poesias* alongside the 2017 collection *Corniglias – Poesias per tai / Alpendohlen – Gedichte für dich*, and consider both as a means of shaping

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Shortt, *German Narratives of Belonging: Writing Generation and Place in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Legenda, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Shortt, *German Narratives of Belonging*, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

multilingual identity through creative practice.<sup>6</sup> I consider Overath's poetics in relation to theories of self-translation and bilingual writing to look at how these poems emerge from a space between languages that not only challenges our understanding of the translative process, but also leads to a reconceptualization of the writing self. Though an equivalence between Overath and the *lyrisches Ich* of these poems is a facile stance to take, as my analysis develops it will become evident that the *lyrisches Ich* is a central feature of the negotiation of belonging that Overath undertakes in her poetry. As I will show, a complex interaction between the generalized 'Ich' of the poems, the writing self, and Overath as an author marks and shapes both collections. Further complexities arise in the poems due to Overath's status as a native German speaker writing in an adopted minority language. On the one hand, her relative position of privilege as a published author in German affords her the creative and economic freedom to engage with poetic experiments in the minor language. On the other hand, however, Overath's status also brings into consideration how her bilingual oeuvre potentially subverts not only the power relationships between languages, but also the expected movement between them that an author may undertake.

### *Writing from the Space between Languages*

Self-translation is the process and product of an author writing a text in one language and then producing a translation of that text into a second, either simultaneously or at a future date. This definition belies, however, greater complexities that challenge the premises which underpin our understanding of translation itself. It also raises questions of how one should

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<sup>6</sup> Angelika Overath, *Corniglias – Poesias per tai / Alpendohlen – Gedichte für dich* (Zürich: SJW Schweizerisches Jugendschriftenwerk, 2017).

negotiate a text that has been written in multiple languages by the same hand. Though once seen as what Rainier Grutman terms a ‘marginal phenomenon,’ self-translation has received increasing attention in Translation Studies and Cultural Studies, as Grutman acknowledges.<sup>7</sup> Most discussions of self-translation focus on the process of negotiation undertaken by the self-translator from the space between languages as they engage with multiple systems of meaning and shape multiple linguistic identities. For Anthony Cordingley, self-translation is a process in which the author performs as a ‘crosscultural interlocutor.’<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson state that the bilingual writer writes ‘from the mid-zone,’ from which they ‘bridge the gaps between cultures but combine them as a single subject.’<sup>9</sup>

That the self-translator writes from a position between languages raises a further question in relation to the object of self-translation. As Adrian Wanner has demonstrated, there is an ambiguity inherent to the term ‘self-translation’: indeed, does ‘self’ refer here to the subject or the object of the translative act?<sup>10</sup> This consideration forms a key aspect of the

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<sup>7</sup> Rainier Grutman, ‘Self Translation’, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, ed. by Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 257-60, (p. 257).

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Cordingley, ‘Introduction: Self-Translation, Going Global’, in *Self-Translation: Brokering Originality in Hybrid Culture*, ed. by Anthony Cordingley (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.1-10 (p. 1).

<sup>9</sup> Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson, *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Literary Self-Translation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 165.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Wanner, ‘The Poetics of Displacement: Self-translation among Contemporary Russian-American Poets’, *Translation Studies* (2017), 1-17 (p. 1). DOI: 10.1080/14781700.2017.1336641.

analysis that follows. In turn, a further challenge emerges when considering self-translation in relation to the concept of ‘originality’. This results directly from the popular conceptualization of a translation as a derivative text produced by an individual who is distinct from the author of the original. When the writer and the translator are the same, however, the status of the ‘translation’ as secondary and of the ‘original’ as ontologically anterior is complicated. It becomes increasingly impossible to talk of an ‘original’ text and a ‘translation’ as separate literary entities. This situation is compounded by the duality of the self in ‘self-translation’: if the self is the object here, then how does this impact on the notion of the ‘original’? I return to this point below.

That the author and the translator are the same person complicates a further debate that has received attention in Translation Studies: namely of the visibility or the invisibility of the translator. In his 1995 text *The Translator’s Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti outlines the domesticating practices that dominated anglophone translations of literary and non-literary texts.<sup>11</sup> He states that the ‘translated text [...] is judged acceptable [...] when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent.’<sup>12</sup> Outlining a selection of reviews of published translations in newspapers and literary journals, he states: ‘A fluent translation is immediately recognizable and intelligible, “familiarized,” domesticated, not “disconcerting[ly]” foreign, capable of giving the reader unobstructed “access to great thoughts,” to what is “present in the original.”’<sup>13</sup> In Overath’s bilingual poetry it is significant, then, that both the Romansh and the German can be seen as ‘original’, as outlined above. That she has authored both versions of the poems means that the ‘illusion

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<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

of transparency' has a reduced relevance as a marker of success.<sup>14</sup> The poetic practices that Overath employs throughout her collections in fact discredit the notion altogether. As will be shown, the conscious interplay between the Romansh and the German versions of the poems, coupled with the self-referential paratextual features that bracket the texts, means that the visibility of Overath in her poems as author *and* translator is intensified. Indeed, her visibility as an author-translator throughout the collections is an integral feature of the negotiation of multilingual identity that takes place in her writing.

The presence of the self across each version of the poems is complicated further by a factor that marks all life-writing: the status of the speaker is always already in question thanks to the complex interaction between the (lyrical) subject and the writing self. Indeed, in these texts there is an inherent distance between the 'original' self that has produced the text and the 'translated' or 'literated' self as represented on the page. Thus, in Overath's bilingual texts – as indeed in all bilingual writing – one can identify multiple processes of translation taking place on and off the page. As Cordingley states, not only is the self-translator an 'intermediary' between two languages, but also 'of and for an "original" text [...] for his or her own self.'<sup>15</sup> This is also proposed by Susan Bassnet, who states that the very concept of self-translation 'is problematic [...] principally because it compels us to consider the problem of the existence of an original.'<sup>16</sup>

As touched upon above, the centrality of the writing self to the process of self-translation and the potential impact that such an undertaking might have is a contentious one. In their exploration of the aesthetics of bilingual writing, Hokenson and Munson outline how

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> 'Introduction', in *Self-Translation*, ed. by Cordingley, pp. 1-10 (p. 1).

<sup>16</sup> Susan Bassnet, 'The Self-Translator as Rewriter', in *ibid.*, pp. 13-25 (p. 15).



the self-translator and the texts that they produce deconstruct binary oppositions between self and other, of the ‘original’ text and its ‘translation’ that have been dominant in our understanding of language as a legacy of German Romanticism.<sup>17</sup> In doing so they counter Friedrich Schleiermacher’s assertions in *Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens* (first delivered as a lecture in June 1813 at the Königlich-Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin).<sup>18</sup> In this treatise, Schleiermacher outlines a link between the *Wesen* of a language that was seen to be analogous to the *Volk* that spoke it, and of the impossibility of expression in another tongue. Schleiermacher asserts that:

Jeder Mensch ist [...] in der Gewalt der Sprache, die er redet; er und sein ganzes Denken ist ein Erzeugniß derselben. Er kann nichts mit völliger Bestimmtheit denken, was außerhalb der Grenzen derselben läge; die Gestalt seiner Begriffe, die Art und die Grenzen ihrer Verknüpfbarkeit ist ihm vorgezeichnet durch die Sprache, in der er geboren und erzogen ist, Verstand und Fantasie sind durch sie gebunden.<sup>19</sup>

Following Schleiermacher’s assertions, the mother tongue is our primary, and indeed our solely comprehensive, means of negotiating the world. What is more, the mother tongue lies at the nexus of our very being. Writing in a language that is not one’s mother tongue not only results in a block on creativity, but in fact serves to reduce our being. That the process of translating the self from one language to another could precipitate such loss is discussed by

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<sup>17</sup> Hokenson and Munson, *The Bilingual Text*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, ‘Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersetzens,’ in *Das Problem des Übersetzens*, ed. by Hans Joachim Störig (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), pp. 38-69 (p. 43).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Mary Besemeres in relation to cross cultural biography written by migrant writers.<sup>20</sup> She classifies such loss as being either active or passive: the latter results in situations in which individuals move to a place in which their native language is not spoken and are therefore faced with its absence. An active loss is, however, ‘more painfully complicit, incurred by living in the second language, taking on the beliefs it configures and hence displacing and “betraying” the beliefs embodied by the native language.’<sup>21</sup>

The relationship between the self, the mother-tongue, and the potential impact that this might have on the creative process is complicated by Overath’s own understanding of poetry as a literary form. In her introduction to *Poesias*, Overath outlines some of the motivating factors behind her multilingual writing yet adopts a stance that arguably epitomizes the Romantic spirit found in Schleiermacher. For Overath, poetry is an innate feature of human life, itself the mother tongue of all humanity that is passed from each mother to her children (*Poesias*, p. 7). This is echoed in the *Nachwort* to the Luchterhand edition of the *Poesias*, in which Overath states that poetry is ‘etwas Elementares.’<sup>22</sup> She sees the relationship between poetry, the body, and our experience of the world going back to the very start of our lives in the use of poetic song to communicate meaning to children in a ‘vorsemantisch’ way.<sup>23</sup> What is more, the notion of the pre-semantic, elemental nature of poetry is so influential for Overath that even the process of learning a new language is cast in terms of a parent-child relationship. As she states: ‘Die Sprache selbst (als ein lebendiger

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Besemeres, *Translating One’s Self: Language and Selfhood in Cross-Cultural Autobiography*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Poesias dals priims plets*, p. 86.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Körper) kann die Rolle der antwortenden, vorsprechenden Mutter übernehmen, die mit dem Lernenden interagiert. Mit ihr zusammen wächst er.<sup>24</sup>

Though Schleiermacher focusses on the philosophical aspects of translation in his treatise, Goethe discusses the practice of translation in his commentary to the first edition of the *West-Östlicher Divan* (1819), a collection of lyrical poetry inspired by the Persian poet Hafiz (c. 1320-1389).<sup>25</sup> In the short section titled ‘Uebersetzungen,’ Goethe outlines his own understanding of the translative process in terms that prioritize fidelity over creativity. He talks of the ‘höchste’ form of translation being one which is true to the original and in a position to assume the place of the original for the non-native reader.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, a translation that deviates from the original is lamented as being ‘der traurigste Mißgriff’ that a translator could undertake or produce.<sup>27</sup> Intriguingly though, he goes on to discuss the creative process behind the *Divan* as one of a ‘[V]erbrüder[ung]’ with the Other.<sup>28</sup> This results in a text in which the ‘Annäherung des Fremden und Einheimischen, des Bekannten und Unbekannten bewegt’.<sup>29</sup> The importance of the term ‘Annäherung’ for Overath’s poetry is discussed in more detail below. Goethe’s phrase points to a creative process by which the author’s relationship with the Other takes shape in a text that responds to and expands upon

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, ‘Besserem Verständnis’, in *West-Östlicher Divan*, 2 vols., ed. by Hendrik Birus (Berlin: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 2010), I: *Texte und Kommentar 1*, 137-299.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

an (absent) original. At the same time this text stands in for and sits alongside the original.

Applying Goethe's theory to self-translation means that there is no limiting of the self through expression in another language. Rather, it is a means by which the Otherness of the second language can be made visible in a way that blurs the relationship between the 'original' and the 'translation'.

I argue that it is this process that filters through into Overath's poetry, as the analysis in sections two and three will demonstrate. Her writing surpasses the highly Romantic sentiments that she outlines in relation to her creative practice. Indeed, as Hokenson and Munson suggest, Schleiermacher's position lessens the status of a bilingual or self-translated text: as they argue, if we (and by extension, one can assume, the understanding of the self) are in thrall to the mother tongue, then each linguistic half cannot function with the same authority.<sup>30</sup> By abandoning the legacy of Schleiermacher's ideas as detailed above, however, writing in multiple languages becomes a way of potentially expanding the self in new directions. That bilingual texts are written by the same hand means that the relationship between languages is reconfigured: bilingual texts and self-translation deconstruct the binary oppositions that mark considerations of texts in translation.<sup>31</sup> In Overath's writings, this creative agency grants access to what Rita Wilson has termed 'the realm of the inexpressible, the space where new expressions are generated in pursuit of the inner voice.'<sup>32</sup> Rather than representing a creative deficit, then, bilingual writing instead functions as a creative zone in

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<sup>30</sup> Hokenson and Munson, *The Bilingual Text*, p. 3-4.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Rita Wilson, 'The Writer's Double: Translation, Writing, and Autobiography,' *Romance Studies*, 27:3 (July 2009), 186-198, (p. 194).

which multiple languages can be negotiated on an equal, horizontal plane.<sup>33</sup> This touches in part on Goethe's statements about the *Divan*: namely, the othering of the self through another language facilitates the creative expansion of the self as the relationship between the two aspects of the writing self becomes clear.

At the same time as offering a means for Overath to negotiate a new multilingual identity, her bilingual poetry poses questions about the political aspects of language use and the power relations that govern individuals' movements between them. Grutman has explored this dynamic in relation to authors whose native tongue is in a lesser position in the global system of linguistic power play.<sup>34</sup> In such situations, authors may feel constrained by both the literary market and the creative potential of their native language in relation to the opportunities afforded by a globally more dominant one. In this situation, self-translation and bilingual writing might offer a means of overcoming such constraints. If, as Hokenson and Munson have stated, bilingual texts re-establish the relationships between languages and different texts on a horizontal rather than a vertical axis, then the power dynamics between them can be countered.<sup>35</sup> The interplay between minor and major languages represents a complicating factor to such reconfigurations, however. Grutman has described this process as the 'double bind' experienced by writers whose native language is classified as minor, especially when one sees literary creation in Romantic terms as being tied to the mother

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Grutman, 'Beckett and Beyond: Putting Self-Translation in Perspective,' *Orbis Litterarum*, 68:3 (2013), 188-206 (p. 198).

<sup>35</sup> *The Bilingual Text*, p. 6.

tongue, no matter how small the community of native speakers actually is.<sup>36</sup> As Grutman states, this ‘double bind’ exists especially in cases in which an author’s ‘native tongue is (much) less widely used, symbolically dominated – or both – yet symbolically and emotionally so important that they do not want to forsake it in favour of an acquired, albeit “major” language.’<sup>37</sup>

Grutman offers a typology of self-translation that posits three camps into which self-translators fall: writers belonging to established linguistic minorities who write in a dominant language; (post)colonial writers who alternate between using their own language and that of the (former) colonizer; and, writers who begin working in one country but then move to another, writing in both their first language and that of the state in which they settle.<sup>38</sup> For Hokenson and Munson the practice of writing in more than one language is complicated by officially bi- or multilingual countries, in which an author might make the political choice to write in a minority language in order to protect and recognize it.<sup>39</sup> However, for Grutman, with regard to the first category, the ‘dynamics of in-State self-translation are fundamentally centripetal in nature,’ regardless of whether the minor language has gained official status.<sup>40</sup> The relationship between Romansh and German is therefore complicated in literature by their status as officially recognized languages within the Swiss Confederation. Overath’s bilingual poetry collections destabilize the dynamics of power and the relationship between German

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<sup>36</sup> Grutman, ‘A Sociological Glance at Self-Translation and Self-Translators’, in *Self-Translation*, ed. by Cordingley, pp. 63-80 (p. 73).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Grutman, ‘Beckett and Beyond’, p. 201.

<sup>39</sup> *The Bilingual Text*, p. 158.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

and Romansh, however, because the minor language is not her native tongue. In Grutman's typology, Overath falls into the third category: she is a migrant who writes exophonically in the language of the milieu in which she now lives. As stated above, the linguistic make-up of Switzerland means that this is, in fact, a non-essential exophoncity. That she chooses to write in Romansh as a native speaker of German means, on the one hand, that she actively works against the 'centripetal' forces supposedly at work in multilingual states such as Switzerland. On the other hand, however, her status as an established writer of a major tongue means that she can use Romansh to facilitate new creative dynamics that perhaps would have been unavailable to her had Romansh been her native language. That is, her native German and pre-existing German-speaking readership means that she is in a potentially privileged position as a writer and has the resources to work with a minor language and engage with its market without limiting her wider readership.<sup>41</sup>

Overath's use of Romansh as a literary language as a means of gaining linguistic competence in the language itself complicates her status as a bilingual self-translator further. Indeed, Hokenson and Munson posit an alternative typology of self-translation, in which individual writers can be categorized into four groups based on their linguistic competence and the use of language(s) in their texts. According to their formulation, Overath can be

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<sup>41</sup> This is not to charge Overath with the colonization of Romansh from her position as a native speaker of German. Indeed, from her attitude towards the language and the reciprocal attitude of native speakers towards Overath, it is clear that she is seeking to belong and contribute to the community, rather than to assert a certain linguistic presence over and within it.

classified as an ‘ambient translingual.’<sup>42</sup> The ambient translingual is an individual who experiences exposure to multiple languages within single spaces or across milieus and borders, and who possesses different degrees of competency in each. This individual ‘may write in some [languages], but usually only speak[s] and write[s] one language well’.<sup>43</sup> Self-translators, however, are described as:

idiomatic bilingual writers who have two literary languages: they compose texts in both languages and they translate their texts between those languages. Thus the bilingual text refers to the self-translated text, existing in two languages, and usually in two physical versions, with overlapping content.<sup>44</sup>

Overath defies such categorization in several ways, not least because her self-translations are published in bilingual editions that present the Romansh and German versions of the poems in parallel. At the same time, in her introduction to *Poesias* she openly acknowledges that she is indebted to others for assistance in editing and translating her poems, naming Esther Krättli, Rut Plouda, and Leta Semadeni. She states: ‘So danke ich drei grossartigen Kolleginnen, die mich frei zwischen zwei Sprachen balancieren liessen und doch acht gaben, dass ich nicht stürzte’ (*Poesias*, p. 9).<sup>45</sup> This support means that Overath defies categorization as either an ‘ambient translingual’ or as a fully bilingual self-translator. Because she writes in an acquired minor language in which she is not fluent, I propose that Overath embodies the ambient self-translator, writing from that space between her native German and the Romansh

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<sup>42</sup> *The Bilingual Text*, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.



that she is adopting whilst employing the very process of writing itself to shape a new, plural identity.

### *Writing a Plural Identity*

As outlined in the introduction, for Overath Romansh functions as a ‘hauchfeine Grenze’ between her and the village she seeks to call home. The language is a linguistic barrier to belonging that can be overcome through its assumption into her body. Throughout *Alle Farben des Schnees* she outlines the often difficult process of learning the language, even going so far as stating that she wishes she did not have to learn it, but rather have it ‘geschenkt bekommen. Wie eine Muttersprache’ (AFS, 86). Or, in phrasing that emphasizes the physicality of the language-learning process, to even be ‘infiziert [mit ihr] wie mit einer Krankheit’ (ibid). As stated in the poem ‘Vita / Leben’, however, she does continue to pursue the ‘regal exotic’ or ‘fremdes Geschenk’ that the language represents:<sup>46</sup>

No eschan estras in quist pajais.	Wir sind Ausländerinnen in diesem Land.
No stuvain Pür imprender ad incleger quist regal exotic. [...] ester, estra – fremd	Wir müssen das fremde Geschenk erst verstehen lernen. [...]

<sup>46</sup> Angelika Overath, *Corniglias / Aplendohlen*, pp. 20-21.

The most intriguing aspect of this poem is the use of the term ‘estras’ or ‘Ausländerinnen’ across both versions. Overath is on the one hand referring to herself, the German, as a foreigner not just in Switzerland but also within the Romansh-speaking community. At the same time, she highlights the linguistic alterity that speakers of Romansh experience within the multilingual Swiss state. As outlined above, the power dynamics between major and minor tongues mean there is always already a pull from the latter to the former: the minor tongue serves as a marker of difference that can be overcome through the assumption of the major language. That the noun ‘foreigner’ is feminine in both versions serves to further highlight the potential position of inferiority from which the *lyrisches Ich* is speaking. This feminized position is interesting within the collection of poems insofar as Overath is not asserting a deeper feminine critique of the relationships between languages; though her poetry is marked as a negotiation of linguistic alterity, she rarely genders this experience. This reality is emphasized in the Romansh by the lineation of the first stanza, which places ‘estras’ as separate from both the verb ‘to be’ and the place of belonging itself, ‘in quist pajais’. That both versions open with the third person plural pronouns ‘no’ and ‘wir’ in Romansh and German respectively, however, means that the *lyrisches Ich* potentially extends a commonality to the reader that is defined as a community of strangers, outsiders, foreigners. When considering the intended audience of the poem – children on the cusp of puberty – this community of otherness takes on a new dimension: what is it, then, that makes these children ‘estras | in quist pajais’ or ‘Ausländerinnen | in diesem Land’? One response would be the language itself. What is clear throughout the collection, however, is that the otherness that might be felt by young speakers of the minority language is something that should, in fact, be celebrated. Indeed, this is a major feature of the poem ‘Pledari simple / Einfaches

Vokabular,’ in which Overath asserts: ‘Tu es (tia) lingua’ or ‘du (bist) deine Sprache’.<sup>47</sup> This is, however, less a Romanticized alignment of the self with a given language than a celebration of multilingual identity brought about by the linguistic make-up of contemporary Switzerland. Indeed, hybrid identities are fundamental to the collection as a whole, and even extend to its paratextual features: hybrid animal-animal and animal-human creatures predominate in Madlaina Janett’s jovial illustrations that accompany the collection.

As outlined above, writing in her adopted language becomes a means of passing through the invisible barrier that Overath perceives between her and her new home. She describes this process in the afterword to *Alle Farben des Schnees* as one of finding ‘eine Identität in der fremden Sprache’ (*AFS*, p. 254). That there is a creativity inherent to this shaping of identity is clear as Overath continues: ‘Ich übte mich darin, auf Sprache mit Sprache zu reagieren’ (*AFS*, p. 254-6). This was, at least in the case of *Poesias*, not always the intention. Indeed, it was the initial refusal of Overath’s publisher Klaus G. Renner to publish a monolingual Romansh volume that forced Overath to find a solution. Overath felt that straight translations of her poems would be ‘weder [...] möglich, noch [...] sinnvoll,’ and so a second creative process was precipitated (*Poesias*, p. 8). As Overath describes:

Nun suchte ich nach deutschen Annäherungen. Manche Texte liessen sich eher leicht übertragen, bei anderen fanden sich nur Variationen, Echos oder Fälschungen. Da ich die Autorin in beiden Sprachen war, durfte ich mir jede Freiheit, jede Abweichung als Annäherung leisten. Dabei reagierte das Deutsche oft verblüffend auf den romanischen Impuls. (*Poesias*, p. 8).

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, pp. 28-29

Overath employs several varied processes to compose her bilingual poems that correspond to the ideas outlined above in relation to bilingual literature and self-translation. Indeed, for Overath the process of translation is one of creative exchange between languages, in which she can test the limits of the very notion of translation itself. As she states: ‘Es gefiel mir, bei diesen Kontaktaufnahmen, Varianten von Freiheitsgraden auszuprobieren.’ (*Poesias*, p. 85)

The terms that Overath uses to describe the process of producing the *Annäherungen* of the poems is revealing, as is the term *Annäherung* itself. It carries a variety of meanings that have distinct implications for the relationship between the two sides of the page. If one considers the term as denoting a harmonization, convergence, or rapprochement, then the poems represent a potentially positive coming together of the two languages. If *Annäherung* is understood as an approximation, however, the poems are marked by an impossibility of harmonization because the German is always already posited in a relationship of difference to the Romansh. The latter is emphasized when one considers how Overath foregrounds variety in the relationship between the versions by positing them as ‘Variationen, Echos [...] Fälschungen’. What is more, Overath’s use of ‘übertragen’ to designate the broader process emphasizes the literary creativity that underpins the whole. Though the term incorporates the process of translation (übersetzen) it points towards both the creation of a new literary character and the re-formation of the text as it passes between languages.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Duden Online Wörterbuch*: ‘Übertragen: “(gehoben) einen [literarischen] Text schriftlich so übersetzen, dass er auch in der Übersetzung eine gültige sprachliche Gestalt hat”’, S. N.

<[https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/uebertragen\\_dolmetschen\\_umwandeln\\_senden](https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/uebertragen_dolmetschen_umwandeln_senden)>

[accessed 29 March 2018].

One can identify both this process taking shape and the impact that it has on Overath in her poem ‘Pel mumaint / Haut, momentan’ (*Poesias*, pp. 30-31):

Pled per pled crescha la pel da la lingua.	Wort für Wort wächst die Haut der Sprache.
Eu sgrafl aint, eu scriv, eu disegn lasura.	Ich ritze hinein, ich schreibe, ich zeichne darauf.
No ans spelain insembel.	Wir häuten uns zusammen.
pled, m – Wort pel, f – Haut pel = per il – für den as spelar – sich häuten	

Here, Overath departs from the similarity of the Romansh words ‘pled’ (word) and ‘pel’ (skin) to speak of the skin of the new language growing with each new word. This formation of a new linguistic identity is granted physicality within the poem by both the actions by which the process is completed (the scratching, the writing, the drawing) and through the siting of this process ‘in’ the ‘language skin’. On the one hand, this draws a parallel between the page as a site of writing and the embodied process of language learning: the marks left by this process form the poem, which represents the trace that remains on the page. On the other hand, this physicality is also one that is potentially harmful: the process of mark-making damages the surface on which it takes place, producing a unique yet irrevocably changed skin

as a sign of a changing identity. The pain caused by this process is discussed in relation to the poem ‘Sotto voce’ below.

A further aspect of the creation of a new ‘surface’ of identity through the language-learning process emerges in ‘Pel mumaint / Haut, momentan’. The Romansh ‘eu sgrafl’ draws to mind the traditional Engadine practice of *Sgraffito*, in which the external plasterwork of buildings is scratched in decorative patterns to reveal the contrasting layers below the surface. By casting poetry in this way, the *lyrisches Ich* is not only calling to mind the traditions of the Engadine Valley but is also marking itself in a public way by scratching through the language surface to reveal a deeper layer of the self. This is emphasized through the dual meaning of the term ‘lasura’ in Romansh: Overath has translated this as ‘darauf’, yet a second possible translation is the German ‘Lasur,’ ‘glaze’. As a product, a glaze both modifies the surface of a given object yet allows the viewer to see the surface below the (semi-)transparent layer that has been applied above it. In the same way, the new language ‘glazes’ over the identity of the learner, changing their surface whilst still allowing it to be seen. This movement is potentially inverted in the final line, in which the assuming or putting on of a new identity also carries within it the idea of shedding, peeling, skinning. This is not a negative process, however, and rather represents the shedding of the angst of learning the language that Overath articulates elsewhere throughout *Alle Farben des Schnees*.

It is clear from ‘Pel mumaint / Haut, momentan’ that, in spite of the creative engagement with the language that writing poetry precipitates, the process is not entirely smooth. For Overath the creation of a multilingual identity is ongoing, and the poems therefore function as a space in which she can grapple with this in a creative way. At roughly halfway through *Poesias*, ‘Sotto voce / Sotto voce’ (*Poesias*, pp. 48-49) stands as both a whisper at its heart, and as a recognition of the difficulty that Overath is experiencing in adopting this new linguistic skin:

Tü portast eir il led aint il pled rumantsch	Im romanischen Kleid, versteckst, Wort, du das Leid.  So wäre der Ton auch ein Spiegel der Not.
led, m – Leid pled, m - Wort	

Playing for a second time with the Romansh ‘pled’, she highlights this difficulty through the interplay between the nouns for ‘word’ and ‘pain’: the glossary highlights that the Romansh ‘pled’ (word) contains within it ‘led’ (pain). Overath maintains this connection through the German ‘Leid’ and ‘Kleid,’ and the shaping of a new multilingual identity therefore contains within it the acknowledgement of a painful reality. This is emphasized in the German expansion of the poem through the orthographic mirroring of the German nouns ‘Ton’ and ‘Not’. Sited at the end of lines four and six, the long vowel forces the reader to pause over the words, slowing down the enjambment that marks the second stanza. Each Romansh sound functions, then, as a mirror of both her distress, but also her relative linguistic poverty. Thus, the process of learning the language and producing these bilingual poems represents an inescapable struggle that Overath is, nonetheless, willing to undertake. Furthermore, this interplay of ‘pled’ and ‘led’ is embedded in the title of the collection itself. The *Poesias dals prüms plets* are not merely *Gedichte aus den ersten Wörtern*, as Overath translates in her introduction to the collection, but also poems from her first pains (*Poesias*, p. 7).

For Overath the creative process is not only a means of learning Romansh by engaging with it directly, but also of negotiating a new multilingual identity. A key aspect of my analysis centres on the fact that the Romansh poems are printed alongside their German ‘Annäherungen’. The question arises, then, of whether the poems could have produced the same effect in a monolingual edition as they do when published bilingually. Speaking in relation to Scots Gaelic, Christopher Whyte offers a scathing critique of self-translation as both literary practice and published text.<sup>49</sup> For Whyte self-translation is only worthwhile if it results in sufficient creative difference between the two versions to produce related yet ultimately divergent texts.<sup>50</sup> In relation to the product, Whyte states that a bilingual, *en face* mode of presentation limits the interpretative freedom of the reader who does not speak the minor language insofar as the (self-)translation is also an original and carries, or is suspected to carry, authorial weight, as outlined in the above section on self-translation.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the version in the minor language can be discarded because the major-language self-translation offers, in a situation that effectively reverses Schleiermacher’s assertions, unimpeded access to the being of the author. Furthermore, there is also a threat posed to the original by the self-translation into the (colonising) major language. Whyte states that the minor original becomes dispensable precisely because of ‘the grimly haunting [English] doubles from which [... the] Gaelic poems no longer have any hope of being prized free’.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Christopher Whyte, ‘Against Self-Translation,’ *Translation and Literature*, 11:1 (2002), 64-71.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



If one applies Whyte's assertions to Overath's collections, then the German effectively elides the Romansh on the page. As has been demonstrated, however, the opposite is true. Indeed, at times Overath's creativity pushes the boundaries of linguistic normality in each language, using one to invigorate the referential field of the other through playful extrapolations and deliberate misreadings. Overath's self-translations possess a creative, freeing character that incorporates multiple processes and produces a sometimes bewildering, perplexing, amazing German response to the original. At the same time, Overath establishes a paratextual framework throughout both collections of poems that facilitates an ongoing exchange between each language. This is especially so with the glossaries that accompany each poem. Indeed, the presence of these glossaries foregrounds the linguistic interplay that is taking place between the two languages and encourages even the non-Romansh speaker to engage with the original version of the poem. In turn this reveals the sometimes hidden wordplay that Overath has produced within and between the languages, which effectively opens up layers of meaning that would not be present had the texts been produced or published monolingually.

The difficult playfulness inherent in Overath's understanding of poetry and her compositions themselves comes to the fore in an untitled poem in the collection *Corniglias / Alpendohlen*:<sup>53</sup>

La poesia nun es üna matta brava.	Die Poesie ist kein braves Kind.
Ella nu fa per cumond.	Sie gehorcht nicht.
Ella ria	Sie lacht insgeheim.

<sup>53</sup> *Corniglias / Alpendohlen*, pp. 26-27.

adascus.	Sie ist wild.
Ella es sulvadia.	Immer hat sie
Adüna ha'la	andere Ideen.
otras ideas.	
[...]	[...]
Es ella ün	Ist sie ein
camelon?	Chamäleon?
[...]	[...]
far per cumond – gehorchen	
sulvadi, sulvadia – wild	

Here, the compulsive creativity that is inherent to Overath's writing process is clear. Overath personifies poetry as a precocious child that refuses to follow orders, whereby she essentially casts the poetic process as being beyond her control and grants the interrelated acts of writing and translating free rein. At the same time, the description of poetry as a chameleon, the lizard famed for changing its appearance to blend in, is telling. On the one hand, it allows Overath to 'change her skin' and blend in in Sent. On the other hand, this metaphor casts the creative process in elusive terms, as always able to slip out of view as its fancy takes it. What is more, this question is presented not as the rhetorical musings of the *lyrisches Ich* but is instead directed out of the poem to the reader. This invites the reader to consider not only what poetry is, but also to consider the processes that underpin Overath's creative practice. Poetry, as I have shown, is for Overath not only an assuming of a new linguistic skin, but also a means of renegotiating the self in and through multiple languages. Like the chameleon, Overath can, through poetry, become part of the wider community background in which she now lives through the changing of her linguistic skin. As I have demonstrated, however, this

process is not without its potential pitfalls, and the poems represent the culmination of an often painful process.

### *Die Haut der Sprache*

As discussed above, the poetry collection *Corniglias / Alpendohlen*, contains, as its final poem, ‘Pledari simpel / Einfaches Vokabular’.<sup>54</sup> The poem represents an exhortation for Romansh-speaking children to be proud of their native tongue and implores them to maintain it as a marker of their identity.

Tü est tia lingua.	Du bist deine Sprache.
Tü est lingua:	Du bist Sprache:
Tü est.	Du bist.
Tü est liber	In deiner Balance
in equiliber	bist du frei.
cun tai.	Sei!
liber, libra – frei	
equiliber, m - Gleichgewicht	

Here, the link between the self and the language one speaks is clear. ‘Pledari simpel / Einfaches Vokabular’ moves beyond the Romantic identification of the self only receiving expression in one language, however, because Romansh and German are presented in parallel: Overath’s exhortation also receives expression in German, highlighting the multilingual reality of Graubünden and the identity that she is shaping. This interplay is

<sup>54</sup> *Corniglias / Alpendohlen*, pp. 28-29.

touched upon by Overath in the introduction to *Poesias* (quoted above), where she speaks of the individual achieving balance between two languages. This image is present in ‘Pledari simpel / Einfaches Vokabular’, too, in the ‘equiliber’ or ‘Balance’ between the Romansh and the German that Overath is presenting. What is more, she plays with the Romansh ‘equiliber’ containing within it the adjective ‘liber’, ‘free’: speaking the new language grants her a freedom that had previously been denied her. There is a direct echo here of an untitled poem contained within *Poesias*, in which Overath states in the German expansion of the Romansh: ‘Die fremde Zunge spricht dich frei’ (*Poesias*, p. 15). In this way, walking the tightrope between two languages is no longer a constraint but rather a liberating process that grants the speaker a certain type of freedom through a multilingual identity. This is evident from the triumphant imperative ‘be!’ that closes ‘Pleadari simpel / Einfaches Vokabular’. It is, however, worth noting that in the German version of this poem, the imperative ‘Sei!’ is set apart from the rest of the poem by a caesura that is not present in the Romansh. This links to how Overath sees the creative process more broadly. In a move that refutes the Romantic notions of self and language that she maintains in her published works, Overath has stated in correspondence: ‘Ich liebe diese Sprache. [...] Sie lässt mich eine andere sein. Sie gibt mir die Möglichkeit der Verwandlung, der Freiheit’.<sup>55</sup> The freedom of the equilibrium is therefore also a freedom through the equilibrium that is felt more keenly in her new linguistic skin.

For Overath, her bilingual poetry collections form part of a broader tradition of multilingual writing and self-translation.<sup>56</sup> She is adamant, however, that they emerge both from a deep love of the Romansh language and a desire to belong, and contribute to, *la*

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<sup>55</sup> Angelika Overath, unpublished email correspondence with the author of this article?, 13 April 2018.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

*Rumantschia*. Importantly, Overath sees the creative process as one that allows her to shape not only belonging, but also her self. As outlined above, the creativity and shaping of the self that is afforded by writing in a minor language that is not her own is only one aspect of these poems. Indeed, by writing in Romansh and engaging in the process of self-translation, Overath asserts the presence of the minor language both on the page and in her wider oeuvre. As has been shown, the relationship between writing in the minor tongue and the creation of a new linguistic and literary identity cannot be underestimated. What is more, the interplay between the Romansh and German versions of the poems is facilitated during the creative process by the translation strategies that Overath employs, and in print by the paratextual features included in both collections. Overath's work moves, therefore, beyond a merely straight self-translation that is published in a bilingual *en face* edition. Indeed, the interplay between each version of the poems is so great that their individual meanings cannot be separated. It is through the interplay of these multiple elements that they become a greater whole. In this way, they represent the emerging, disruptive, and heterogenous linguistic identity that Overath is seeking to create. I leave the final word with Overath, who states in her introduction to *Poesias*: 'Im romanischen ist das Wort für Klang, sun, identisch mit der ersten Person Singular von sein, esser. Ich bin: eu sun. Romanisch schreibend wuchs meine erste romanische Identität.' (*Poesias*, p. 7).

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