



Oxford Research in English

ISSUE 1, WINTER 2014

“Margins”

Oxford Research in English

Graduate Research Journal, English Faculty, University of Oxford

<http://english.ohgn.org/journal>

Editorial committee 2014-2015:

Jennie Cole
Ed Dodson
Bárbara Gallego Larrarte
Katharina Herold
Jennifer Hurd
Kathleen Keown
Daniel Matore
Julia Mattison
Camille Pidoux
Callum Seddon

Founding members:

Camille Pidoux (*founder and head
of the committee 2014-2015*)
Callum Seddon
Jennie Cole

With special thanks to Charlie Dawkins and Dominic Davies.

Oxford Research in English

“Margins” Issue 1, Winter 2014

Contents:

Margins conference, June 2014.

Charlie Dawkins, University of Oxford 4

“They now think to plant themselves in liberties’: The role of the Blackfriars in moving Early Modern theatre out of the margins.”

Lana Harper, University of Sussex 6

“Marlow’s Older Brother: A Forgotten Australian, a Moral Morass, and the Last Free Islands of the South Pacific.”

Victoria Warren, University of East Anglia 16

“Shifting Centres: Crafting a World through Language in Translingual Writing.”

Josianne Mamo, University of Glasgow 25

Focus on an early-career researcher: Dominic Davies .

by Ed Dodson 36

ORE

Shifting Centres: Crafting a Fictional World in Translingual Writing

Josianne Mamo, University of Glasgow

*The fact that I
am writing to you
in English
already falsifies what I
wanted to tell you.
My subject:
how to explain to you that I
don't belong to English
though I belong nowhere else."*

Pérez Firmat, "Dedication", *Bilingual Blues* 3

In his collection of poetry *Bilingual Blues*, Cuban writer Gustavo Pérez Firmat aptly captures the liminal existence of a translingual writer. He dedicates much of his creative and critical energy to exploring the concept of living between two worlds but never fully in one, what I read as a third space where two cultures and their languages intersect (Bhabha 38). Like Homi K. Bhabha, Pérez is concerned with cultural and identity politics. However, his studies also centre on the linguistic issues and craftsmanship involved in the creative process of a bilingual writer. He chisels at the artistic form, exposing the intricacies involved in writing in a language other than the mother tongue, but he also studies the reception of translingual writing in contemporary times. In a similar way to Pérez, this essay will focus on the linguistic and cultural issues related to crafting a fictional world in the process of writing in a language other than your first one. But even in writing this last sentence, the first complexity emerges: What is a first language? Do we mean the language we learnt to speak in the first three years (or alternative period) of our life? And should the 'true bilingual', then, have learnt the two languages simultaneously in those three years? What if a language is predominantly used for one specific skill, writing in this case? How would it apply, for instance, to a person who first learnt to speak Maltese at home but whose first contact with the written word was, and remains, in English? How does it affect the thought and creative process of a writer? And what is the role of culture in this analysis?

I will first turn to linguistics to tackle these questions. Bloomfield describes bilingualism as “a native-like control of two languages” (56), where the bilingual attains such proficiency in the second language that one cannot distinguish the difference from a native speaker. According to this definition, no traces of the mother tongue can be found on the acquired language – be it in written or verbal form. This school of thought would see these traces as contaminants, a “mishmash of tongues. Not a system of language at all” (Deleuze and Guatteri 24). For many language purists, the problem lies in the cross-contamination, the intersection of these two languages. According to this school of thought, when these intersect, the road can only lead to Babel, i.e. language loses its purity. This, I believe, is where the origin of the distrust lies. François Grosjean, on the other hand, disagrees with Bloomfield’s view. For Grosjean, bilingualism does not imply knowing “two languages perfectly” (*Studying Bilinguals* 215). In fact, it is rare for a bilingual to have equal fluency in the acquired languages. He claims it is a misconception that bilinguals become equally fluent in their languages. But more importantly, Grosjean states “bilinguals use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, to accomplish different things” (“Bilingualism: A Short Introduction” 7). Is this not what happens when a writer uses one language over another to write in: a diglossia of sorts, where one language serves the specific function of expressing oneself in writing?

In *Switching Languages*, Seven G. Kellman focusses on this type of bilingualism or multilingualism where one language is primarily used over another in writing. For this, he proposes the term ‘translingualism’, defining translingual authors as “those who write in more than one language or in a language other than their primary one” (ix). According to Kellman, there are two types of translingual writers: those who switch languages from one text to another and those who primarily write in an acquired language. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o is an example of the former. His first literary work was the play *Black Hermit* (1963, first published in 1968), which was followed by a succession of novels written in English. However, later in life, he resorted to writing in his native Gikuyu.¹ An example of the second is Joseph Conrad. Conrad was Polish by birth and, despite only learning English in his twenties, he wrote fiction in English. For Ngũgĩ, using Gikuyu was a conscious decision driven by cultural and political affiliations, whereas for Conrad, as he himself claims, it was less a matter of choice than of being “adopted by the genius of the language” (qtd. in Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* 22).

Kellman’s discussion of translingualism is interesting but not without its flaws. What is missing in his discussion is an in-depth analysis of how language functions in translingual

1 For more on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s decision to write in Gikuyu, see *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*.

writing: the conscious and unconscious decisions a writer makes in the creative process. True, his discussion may be broader rather deeper in scope. He traces translingual writers across the globe and through different times, providing a foundation for the new reader in translingual writing. He investigates what might influence a writer to use one language over another through interviews and biographies. But most importantly, his work focusses on the reception and perception of the translingual text. He refutes the widespread belief that writers can only write well in their native tongue, stating that by “expressing themselves in multiple verbal systems, [translingual writers] flaunt their freedom from the constraints of the culture into which they happen to have been born” (*Switching Languages* ix).

Kellman gives various examples of high profile translingual writers such as Samuel Beckett, Joseph Conrad, and Vladimir Nabokov, all familiar names whose works have been commercially successful and introduced in the Western literary canon. For Kellman these writers “challenge the pronouncement by George Santayana [...] that authentic poetry can be written only in the language of the lullabies the poet’s mother sang” (ix). But such a declaration is charged with contradictions. In the case of Santayana, who wrote in English and not his native Spanish, this was a self-critical proclamation. This is a very common condition in translingual writers Grosjean claims – a consequence of using a monolingual measuring stick is that “bilinguals rarely evaluate their language competencies as adequate” (“Neurolinguists Beware!” 5).

But sometimes the distrust is external to the writer. To highlight this, Kellman tells the story of Andreï Makine, a Russian émigré in Paris who chose to write in French. At the beginning of his career, Makine was only able to publish his work in French by stating it was translated from Russian (*Switching Languages* ix). This anecdote is relevant because it exposes how the publishing industry and the literary community may perceive the translingual writer, the distrust it often shows, and hence the difficulty a translingual writer may face in publishing work that is written in a language other than his or her mother tongue. Of course, it is always reasonable to question the quality of the writing (even if aesthetic judgement varies and is subjective in nature) but suffice it to say that Makine was awarded the Prix Medicis and the Prix Goncourt for his later novel *Le Testament Français*. In a way, Kellman’s study of the translingual imagination is reassuring for an emerging writer who keeps constantly being asked, ‘Why write in English and not your native tongue?’.

However, the broad scope of Kellman’s definition does not take into account the different types of multilingualism he offers as examples. And even if he uses linguistic terminology, such

as code-switching (*The Translingual Imagination*, 15) to refer to the practice of using more than one language in a text, he does not adopt a linguistic approach that may help define the term he proposes. This is what Marie Lauret highlights in her work *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature* (2014). She dissects his claim that translingual writers aspire “to transcend language in general, to be pandictic, to utter everything. Impatient with the imperfections of finite verbal systems, they yearn to pass beyond words to silence and truth” (*The Translingual Imagination*, 16), arguing that Kellman uses ‘translingualism’ to label the movement from one language to another without analyzing the purpose, functions, and, I would add, the types of shifts taking place (cultural, political, etc.). According to Lauret, who never adopts the term translingualism, the language shifts that Kellman refers to are unidirectional rather than two languages informing each other. Moreover, she takes issue with the theory of universal language his argument is derived from, which implies that a language can only articulate an approximation of meaning, hence “human communication [...] is forever doomed to misunderstanding” (Lauret 14).

While I agree that the textual analysis in Kellman’s *The Translingual Imagination* is sparse, I would still like to adopt the term ‘translingual’ and propose a more in-depth analysis of it. A translingual writer’s multilingual background gives her access to different linguistic and cultural systems of conceptualizing the world (similar to the linguistic relativity theory which will be discussed in more detail further on). And since languages co-exist, as Lauret rightly points out, it is often manifested on the page. I would take this a step further and suggest there are various linguistic and non-linguistic stratifications and intersections prevalent in writing about a culture through another language (e.g. a Maltese writing in English when most of the national literature is produced in the native tongue). A manifestation of linguistic stratification in writing is the exclusive use of one language in a text, while intersections are the fusion of two or more languages on the page. One of the limits to the stratification theory is traces of calques, or inflections from one language into the other. Just as water permeates sedimentary rocks, so can knowledge (consciously or not) permeate the stratifications, or creative restrictions, translingual writers may impose on themselves. Joseph Conrad’s work is one such case, as Kellman himself points out (*The Translingual Imagination* 11). Among many other things, these calques are, for linguist purists, evidence of the lack of mastery of a language while for others, therein lies the source of genius and originality, the very strength of his writing. However, a distinction that needs to be made here is between the writer’s possible intended effect (e.g. the exclusive use of one language or the fusion of two on the page) and the one achieved (e.g. the linguistic inflections evident in a text or the clarity of meaning). In any case, whether the final

output is in one language or more, the writer's multilingual background suggests a process of self-translation is taking place in the creation of the text.

This raises the question of how the multilingual writer's role differs from or is similar to a translator's, which is what postcolonial translation theory essentially focusses on. The first similarity is that both the translingual writer and the translator exist between two or more languages. But the question of whether both are regarded in the same way by the publishing industry and the literary community remains. The literary translator is trusted with the movement between languages whereas the translingual writer, as Makine's example shows, may need to work harder to earn that trust. This may be because the translingual writer is crafting a world from scratch – the source is her imagination, unlike the literary translator who has to work within the boundaries of meaning in the original text. A world has already been crafted by someone with a native control of the original language and meaning surrounds it. Whatever the translator creates exists within the boundaries of that meaning (the plot, the characters, the story) and the dialogical relation between the languages of the two cultures in question, what Eugene Nida describes as the 'dynamic equivalence' from the source to the target language (Nida 159, see also *Translation Studies* 34). The writer, on the other hand, starts with a blank page. A world is crafted and in so doing, meaning is born. The idea of the 'original' is much debated in postcolonial translation theory and I do not wish to imply translation is a derivative activity or dismiss the translator's creative and interpretative process, but rather highlight the translingual writer's dual role.

While for the translingual writer the movement between texts is missing, there is still movement between languages. Think of Salman Rushdie, whom Susan Bassnett-McGuire and Harish Trivedi write, "does not need to be translated [because] he has already translated himself into becoming an English-language writer, through a transformation of which signs are deliberately and transparently [...] strewn all over his work" (12). Hence, for the translingual writer the creative process includes linguistic, cultural, and political translation but, similar to what a monolingual writer does, also that of building a fictional world – storyline, character development, plot. It is in this sense that she is the source of the original text in a way a translator is not, though it does not follow that she is the source of a text's ultimate meaning. Once the text is written, it can be decoded and recoded by the reader or translator, each leaving her own imprint on it. But, if we go back to the moment of creation, the time the text is written, we can identify in the translingual writer's process of writing that which is absent in the monolingual writer's process but present in the translator's: the shift between languages.

A translingual writer's choice of language can be both declarative and functional. Behind every language choice is a conscious decision, a statement a writer is making. In writing in a preferred language, the author of an original text could be declaring her personal preference, political dissension, cultural affinity, and the list goes on. For Pérez Firmat, "the language that we speak is a fundamental component of our nationality, and hence of our sense of who we are", adding that "language acts are acts of identity" ("Bilingual Blues, Bilingual Bliss", 433). Here I suggest that for translingual writers, choosing a language in which to write is an utterance in itself and, as J. L. Austin states, behind every utterance there is a force (Austin 252). For a translingual writer, the force of an utterance could be to proclaim one's identity, to reflect one's liminal existence, as well as to protest against or embrace a culture.

Hence, behind the act of choosing a language may lie a political force such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decision to abandon English for his native Gikuyu. Such a decision can be read as what Homi K. Bhabha refers to as an act of "cultural contestation" in analysing a section from Adil Jussawalla's poem 'Missing Person'.

A- 's a giggle now
 But on it Osiris, Ra.
 An ँ an er ... a cough,
 Once spoking your valleys with light.
 But the a's here to stay.
 On it St. Pancras station,
 The Indian and African railways.
 That's why you learn it today. (58)

In using the Hindi vowel, Jussawalla is articulating the 'vacillating boundaries' of linguistic and cultural condition (59). The juxtaposition of the English 'a' with its Hindi equivalent is a manifestation of the difference between the two cultures. Orthographic difference articulates cultural difference and becomes not just a visual reminder of the native language but the core of the poem. In turn, the ellipsis represents the space in between the two languages, or the liminality in which the writer finds himself.

The same applies to translingual writers who resort to fusing two languages in a text as Junot Díaz does with Spanish and English in *A Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Díaz may be using this technique to capture the state of linguistic liminality his characters find themselves in – that feeling of belonging neither to Spanish nor to English but to both. I read this juxtaposition as an act of decentralizing language. Díaz creates an interplay between the familiar and the foreign, the Us and the Other, "because whenever the 'foreign' is encountered, the

question is: 'foreign' to whom?" (Lauret 8). As much as one can say Spanish is the foreign element in the text, it is equally true that the English reader is foreign to the Spanish language. The function of language here is to shift the paradigms of how we perceive the world. And in this case, as much as the Spanish language is evidence of the writer's liminality, it also shifts the paradigms of the monolingual reader, be it Anglophone or Spanish.

In this liminal space, the boundaries of each language dissolve and the translingual writer gains access to two or more systems of conceptualizing the world while, in turn, the reader gets a view of the multilingual world – a third meaning is born. In a *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure states that “the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses” (66). Saussure suggests that language is the link between sound and thought. If this is the basis of the argument, one must not forget that senses are variable and that concepts vary across cultures, too. Language helps us externalize how we perceive the world. If, according to Sapir, “no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality,” (69) then the monolingual has access to only one system of describing this world, the translingual has two or more. Although in our globalised world, we have had to take in words and phrases from other languages to be able to describe our cultural encounters, this is more pronounced for translingual writers. This is also true of how culture shapes the writer's perceptions, what Saussure refers to as ‘concepts’. Learning a language is not only about learning its sounds but it also entails learning the concepts that surround it. Does this not add richness to the way we interpret the world we live in?

Learning a language also means learning its culture. Whilst born in Malta, I grew up with Enid Blyton books, reading about tea parties with baskets full of scones and jam enjoyed on beaches swept by the evening tide. I would wonder if scones tasted like *ftajjar*, light, salty, black crust sticking between your teeth, but somehow I could never marry the taste of olives and jam. I knew everything and I knew nothing about scones and tides and lakes and rivers and mountains and snow. That is until I came to the UK fifteen or so years after reading Blyton's books. Yet in my imagination, I had travelled to the UK long before that. In the same way, I want to transport the Anglophone reader to my own country. The challenge lies in capturing a culture that is shared by less than half a million people and making it intelligible to the world. How do you refer to the endemic landscape, *ix-Xagħri*, that is so particular to Malta? Do you use the term ‘garigue’ (itself a French loan word from ‘garrigue’) which, it transpired during a workshop for my piece, was no more familiar to my English readers than the native word?

Besides, ‘garigue’ has more academic and technical associations in Maltese literature than the sensory and emotional connotations the native term affords in everyday language. A dictionary entry would focus on the typical dryness of the Mediterranean region and not the smell of thyme that tickles your sensory perception as you view the sea’s expanse from the edge of the cliffs.² So, should the writer aim for linguistic equivalence or take a more creative approach?

Every decision such as the one described above has its own dilemmas, but can we identify what the general implications are when a translingual writer is faced with such a decision? I turn to Bakhtin’s *Discourse in the Novel* to answer this. I have suggested that in the craft of writing, the writer is constantly making linguistic choices. Every word needs to have a specific function, sometimes multiple ones. This implies an element of intentionality on the author’s part or, to use Bakhtin’s terminology, every word must carry intentional possibilities, and “[t]hese possibilities are realized in specific directions, filled with specific content, they are made concrete, particular, and are permeated with concrete value judgements” (Bakhtin 289). The words *Xagħri* and *garigue* may be considered equivalent in meaning but *ix-Xagħri* carries far more creative and cultural possibilities.

In the following extract from *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, in which Beli, pregnant with Gangster’s child, is kidnapped, heavily beaten, and loses her child, we see both linguistic and cultural shifts.

So as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. This one was quite large for its species and placed its intelligent little paw on her chest and stared down at her.

You have to rise.

My baby, Beli wept. Mi hijo precioso.

Hypatía, your baby is dead.

No, no, no, no, no.

It pulled at her unbroken arm. *You’ll have to rise now or you’ll never have the son or daughter.*

What son? What daughter?

The ones who await. (Díaz 149)

2 The Oxford English Dictionary entry for ‘garigue’ is supported by quotes featuring words like “waste tracts”, “bare rocks”, “uncultivated wasteland covered in prickly oaks”, of which the latter, the reader will note, is questionably taken from a work of fiction — G. Bellairs’ *Death in the Wasteland* (46). Other dictionaries support this image of dryness (see entry in Merriam-Webster dictionary).

The European reader encounters Spanish words in the text but also a reference that could be read from the reader's perspective as one to classical antiquity. Beli's lament is the most powerful sentence of this interaction. The shift from 'My baby' to 'Mi hijo precioso' vividly captures the image of the weeping mother but it also takes us back to the cultural setting in which the action is happening – the Dominican Republic. The Spanish words also convey the void that is left behind as a result of the social and political unrest in the country. The movement between languages has created multiple meanings. And this is the point when for Díaz English alone could not adequately capture the violence and void Trujillo's dictatorship leaves behind. Within this transcultural mediation, Díaz builds different layers to expose the personal and the social anguish. The name Beli Hypatía Cabral may also be an allusion to Hypatía, a controversial figure from classical antiquity who defied all conventions of her time donning a scholar's rather than a woman's robes. Díaz travels from the contemporary Caribbean to classical Europe, from the personal to the social, from English to Spanish. What makes the translingual writer, like Díaz, different to the monolingual one is not just the movement between languages but the internal linguistic stratifications he builds in the process.

This is what Bakhtin calls heteroglossia – the interplay between the unitary and centrifugal nature of language. He states that:

Every utterance participates in the 'unitary language' (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces). (Bakhtin 272)

The nature of language is not linear but dialogic. The environment in which language exists is elastic; it transcends time and space changing with and across it. Moreover, there is a social heteroglossia that surrounds the object, the "Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object" (278). It is as if in uttering a word the writer leaves a mark on it, inviting the reader to interpret the word in a new light. The writer "breaks through the alien conceptual of the horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener's, apperceptive background" (282) as we have seen in the extract above.

Hence, translingual writers are linguistic and cultural interpreters. Their access to another language also affords access to a different perception of the world. They can slide from the limitations of one language to the possibilities of another. Translingual narrative is not just about writing in another language but about translating a culture into that alien language, a language that may not offer the right tools to express these cultural differences. There is an element of appropriation in this, a "seizure and transformation [of language] into private property" (Bakhtin 294). While no word is neutral for any writer, this is even more applicable to

the translingual writer. Every word is fraught with layers upon layers of intentions accumulated through the epochs. For the translingual writer, the craft lies in the transcultural mediation of language while ensuring both linguistic and cultural clarity, where the concept being introduced in the text has to make sense to someone living outside of the values of the native language. At the same time, the translingual writer has to avoid pedantic or oversimplified explanations that alienate readers sharing the same cultural values.

Works cited

- Austin, J. L. "Performative Utterances." *Philosophical Papers*. Eds. Urmson, J. O. and G. J. Warnock. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. 234–53. Print.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Discourse in the Novel." Trans. Emerson, Caryl and Michael Holquist. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Holquist, Michael. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. 259–422. Print.
- Bassnett-McGuire, Susan. *Translation Studies*. 3rd ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Bassnett-McGuire, Susan, and Harish Trivedi. "Introduction: of Colonies, Cannibals and Vernaculars." *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 1999. 1–18. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Bellairs, George. *Death in the Wasteland*. London: John Gifford LTD, 1963. Print.
- Bloomfield, Leonard. *Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Guatteri Felix. "What Is a Minor Literature?" *Mississippi Review* 11.3 (1983): 13–33. Print.
- Díaz, Junot. *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Print.
- Firmat, Gustavo Pérez. *Bilingual Blues: Poems, 1981-1994*. Tempe: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, 1995. Print.
- . "Bilingual Blues, Bilingual Bliss: El Caso Casey." *MLN*. 117.2 (2002): 432–48. Web.

- "Garigue." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster, 2011. *Merriam-Webster.com*. Web. 5 May 2015.
- "Garigue." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. *OED.com*. Web. 05 May. 2015.
- Grosjean, François. "Bilingualism: A Short Introduction." *The Psycholinguistics of Bilingualism*. Eds. Grosjean, François and Li Ping. West Sussex: WileyBlackwell/John Wiley & Sons, 2013. 5-25. Print.
- - -. *Studying Bilinguals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.
- - -. "Neurolinguists, Beware! The Bilingual Is Not Two Monolinguals in One Person." *Brain and Language* 36.1 (1989): 3-15. Web.
- Kellman, Steven G. *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on Their Craft*. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press; Chesham: Combined Academic, 2003. Print.
- - -. *The Translingual Imagination*. Lincoln [Neb.]: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. Print.
- Lauret, Maria. *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. Print.
- Ngũgĩ wa, Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: Currey, 1986. Print.
- - -. "Ngugiwathiongo.Org." Web.
- - -. *The Black Hermit*. African Writers Series, 51. Nairobi, London etc.: Heinemann Educational, 1968. Print.
- Nida, Eugene Albert. *Toward a Science of Translating, with Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964. Print.
- Sapir, Edward. *Culture, Language and Personality*. Berkeley University of California Press, 1958. Print.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. Baskin, Wade. Revised ed. London: Fontana, 1974. Print.

