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THE BILINGUAL IMAGINATION: JOYCE, BECKETT, NABOKOV AND THE  
MAKING OF MODERN FICTION

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Bilingual Imagination:

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This dissertation traces the creative tension that results from writing with more than one language in hand. I suggest that bilingual authors are linguistically complex in a manner that makes them fundamentally different from monolingual ones. A deeper awareness of the material way in which bilingual writing diverges from the writing of monolingual authors may not only shed new light on these three authors and their writings but on the workings of language in multilingual fiction, and possibly on the workings of language in literature generally.

While James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov were thoroughly fluent in several languages, multilingualism takes a different form in each of their works. Yet for all three authors a multilingual background is indissolubly connected to the writing, both on the formal level of the text (the use of foreign words, multilingual puns, a play with accent and pronunciation) and as theme and content. Although all their languages leave traces in their writing, I will focus especially on the two languages that in

each writer was most important in the actual crafting of the works: English and Italian for Joyce, English and French for Beckett, English and Russian for Nabokov. Through analyses of texts by Joyce (the “Epiphanies,” *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*), Nabokov (*Король, дама, валет* (*King, Queen, Knave*), *Подвиг* (*Glory*), *Lolita*, *Pnin* and *Ada*) and Beckett (*Watt*, and *The Trilogy* in English and French), of letters (both published and unpublished), interviews, recollections of the writers by their contemporaries, recordings, (auto) biographies, and notebooks, I examine the effect that multilingualism has on their written language and suggest that their complex multilingual background produced distinct literary results.

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Parts of this dissertation have been published, accepted, or submitted for publication. A section of the second chapter has appeared as “Of Sirens Silent and Loud: The Language Wars of Joyce and Kafka” in the *James Joyce Quarterly* (Vol. 49, No. 1, 2013). A section of the fourth chapter has been published in the *Journal of Modern Literature* as “A Search for the Viscous and Sawdust: (Mis)pronunciation in Nabokov’s American Novels” (37.1 Fall 2013), and an additional section of this chapter has appeared as “To Fondle in ‘Humbertish’: Vladimir Nabokov’s Linguistic Exile” in a volume of essays entitled *Languages of Exile: Migration and Multilingualism in Twentieth-Century Literature*, edited by Axel Englund and published winter 2013 with Peter Lang Publishing. I am deeply grateful to the editors at these publications, from whose painstaking proof-readings of my manuscripts the dissertation benefitted enormously as I reworked these articles into chapters.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE The Peculiarity of Bilingual Writers: Neuro- and Psycholinguistic Aspects of Multilingualism	14
CHAPTER TWO Basically English: Joyce, Italian and the Creation of <i>Finnegans Wake</i> 's Multilingual Universe	52
CHAPTER THREE Comment Dire: Beckett between English and French	110
CHAPTER FOUR As American as April in Arizona: Vladimir Nabokov's Linguistic Exile	156
EPILOGUE	208
Bibliography	210



## Introduction

Describing Vladimir Nabokov's multilingual works, George Steiner has written, "I have no hesitation in arguing that this polylinguistic matrix is the determining fact of Nabokov's life and art" (*Extraterritorial* 7). I think that the same might be said about James Joyce and Samuel Beckett: in this dissertation, I suggest that the multilingualism of these three authors was the governing force of much of their writing.

While Joyce, Beckett and Nabokov were all thoroughly fluent in several languages, multilingualism takes a different form in each of their works. Yet for all three authors a multilingual background is organically connected to the writing, both on the formal level of the text (the use of foreign words, multilingual puns, a play with accent and pronunciation) and as theme and content.

Although all their languages left traces in the writing, I will focus especially on the two languages that for each were most important in the actual crafting of the works: English and Italian for Joyce, English and French for Beckett, English and Russian for Nabokov.<sup>1</sup> Through analyses of texts by Joyce (the "Epiphanies," *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*), Nabokov (*Король, дама, валет* (*King, Queen, Knave*), *Подвиг* (*Glory*), *Lolita*, *Pnin* and *Ada*) and Beckett (*Watt*, and *The Trilogy* in English and French), of letters (both published and unpublished), interviews, recollections of the writers by their contemporaries, recordings, (auto) biographies, and notebooks, I examine the effect that

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, in the literature on multilingualism, bilingualism tends often to be used as an overarching term, which includes multilingualism, or the two terms are used interchangeably. The linguist Li Wei writes, for instance, that some researchers "use 'bilingualism' as a general term to include multilingualism as well, while others prefer to maintain a distinction between the two. More research is needed to understand how bilingualism and multilingualism differ from each other" (*Bilingualism Reader* 8).

multilingualism has on their written language and suggest that their complex multilingual background produced distinct literary results.

As I started working on this project, I was struck by what seemed a distinctive character in the writing of bilingual authors and I began to explore what might constitute this character. At first, I approached the problem pragmatically and on the page of the texts. In the works of all three writers I found, for instance, not just a radical use of foreign words and expressions, but a heightened attention to accent and pronunciation and to the materiality of language. I started to cast about for help in understanding what I found, turning first to literary theory on the subject of multilingual literature. To my surprise,<sup>2</sup> I did not find much. What I did find was excellent and informative in many ways but did not help me make sense of the multilingualism of these writers in a concrete way.<sup>3</sup>

Wondering where to turn next, I came across a book that produced in me something like a Joycean epiphany: a sudden, but academic, spiritual manifestation. The book was Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour's *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the "First" Emigration*. I will discuss this study in the next chapter, but here briefly: Klosty Beaujour used research on multilingualism from the fields of neuro- and psycholinguistics to gain a new understanding of multilingual writing and generated

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<sup>2</sup> But not necessarily to that of others: Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour comments that bilingualism is a problematic topic "for all the disciplines that should take it into account because it invariably introduces messy methodological complications" (2).

<sup>3</sup> Some works of criticism dealing with multilingual fiction are Lawrence Rosenwald, *Multilingual America: Language and the Making of American Literature*; Werner Sollors, *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature*; Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education*; Leonard Forster, *The Poet's Tongues: Multilingualism in Literature*; Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*; Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien, *Weird English*; and Joshua Miller, *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism*. As some of the titles already imply, these works are concerned more with the political and cultural implications of multilingualism and with issues of national identity than with stylistic aspects of bilingual writing.

precisely the kind of concrete results that I was looking for – she argued that bilingual writers are different from monolingual ones in part because they have a different neurolinguistic substrate for language an understanding of which enhances an appreciation for their particularities as writers.

Inspired by Klosty Beaujour’s account, I embarked on my own neuro- and psycholinguistic search, reading first the research to which Klosty Beaujour referred in her book and later the more recent works, and discovering that much of the thinking on bilingualism from cross-linguistic studies has changed since the publication, in 1989, of *Alien Tongues* – as I will explain in the next chapter. What I found proved fascinating and very useful for the analyses of the multilingualism of Joyce, Beckett and Nabokov and their works. To give just one example here, I found that the increased attention to pronunciation and accent in their works could possibly be explained by linguistic research that has shown that active multilingualism enhances metalinguistic awareness, the conscious awareness of structural properties of one’s language, which allows multilingual people to perceive language in a superior way.

In the first chapter I will describe those findings from the field of neuro- and psycholinguistics that are most germane to an analysis of multilingual writers. I will also define some of the concepts I will employ in the remainder of the dissertation – such as “code-switching” and the “tip-of-the-tongue” phenomenon. The review of these linguistic terms and findings will be completely geared towards my discussion of the works of Joyce, Beckett and Nabokov. I do not pretend to give a full overview of neuro- and psycholinguistic research into bilingualism of the past decades – the field is too broad, and this dissertation too narrow.

In the following three chapters, then, I will use these linguistic findings as a tool for understanding the bilingualism of the three writers and their works. In the chapter on Joyce I explore the notion of talent in second-language learning and the consequences that Joyce's linguistic aptitude had for his use of English. The chapter also rethinks Joyce's relation with Italian and the significance this had for his engagement with English. Finally, it contrasts the more political aspects of Joyce's linguistics with those of Franz Kafka, in order to reconsider the ways in which Joyce inhabits the English language and to demonstrate how an appreciation of the linguistic features of Joyce's bilingualism can illuminate the political aspects.

In the next chapter, I reevaluate Beckett's constant back and forth between English and French and the consequences this had for his writing. I suggest that the concept of "first language attrition," the gradual loss, or growing inaccessibility, of one's mother tongue, was a central aspect of Beckett's relation to both English and French, and that this might have been an important motive for Beckett's starting to compose fiction in French after the war.

In the chapter on Nabokov, finally, I compare the language of some of Nabokov's early novels in Russian with that of his later American works. I try here to show that while still writing in Russian, Nabokov was concerned with keeping his Russian "pure," free from foreign languages. The desire for linguistic purity in his Russian works stands in contrast to the radical multilingualism of his American novels, where multilingualism and the exile's struggle with a new tongue become central themes.

Together, my analyses of the writings of Joyce, Beckett and Nabokov suggest that works of multilingual authors are fundamentally different from monolingual ones. A

deeper awareness of the material way in which multilingual writing diverges from that of monolinguals may not only shed light on these three authors and their writings but on the workings of language in multilingual fiction, and possibly on language in literature generally.

### **A Brief Illustration: Joseph Conrad**

A look at the contrasting case of Joseph Conrad might begin to elucidate some of these issues. Unlike Joyce, Beckett and Nabokov, Conrad never published a word in his native language. Much critical inquiry has examined Conrad's decision to write in English rather than in his native Polish, or in the French he acquired long before he began learning English. Reasons scholars have given for what they see as Conrad's unusual choice vary from the psychological (Conrad could not write in Polish because of the "great emotional scars received in his early life as exile and later orphan" (Pousada 341),<sup>4</sup> or the personal (writing in Polish "would have imparted an element of immediacy and a quality of autobiographical proximity to his tales which, causing his tongue to stammer and his pen to tremble, might well have wrecked his art upon the shoals of personal involvement" (Meyer, quoted in Pousada 341)), or the sentimental-political (where Poland was nothing but a suppressed Russian colony of sorts, Britain represented a "noble nation," "civilization on a grand scale" (Pousada 341)), or the practical (there already had been a Polish writer called Józef Korzeniowski,<sup>5</sup> in the early 1800s). All

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<sup>4</sup> Alicia Pousada's excellent overview of Conrad's linguistic development as well as of relevant criticism concerning the question of Conrad's language use has been invaluable for this discussion.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pousada 342. Józef Korzeniowski "was an early nineteenth-century patriotic writer" (Batchelor 110). Conrad's full name in Polish is Józef Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski.

these motives may have operated in the famous “Conrad switch,” but I think there were linguistic reasons as well.

When Conrad relocated to England in 1878, at the age of twenty-one, he knew little English but he learned the language quickly, without, however, studying it formally. In an interview with R.L. Mégroz Conrad recalls: “I absolutely refused to learn grammar, and I picked up my first English by hearing it spoken on colliers along the East Coast” (208).<sup>6</sup> Working aboard English ships, he picked up the language from British sailors, from reading English newspapers, and from studying Shakespeare and John Stuart Mills’ *Political Economy*.<sup>7</sup> Thus, by the time Conrad begun writing *Almayer’s Folly*, in 1889, he had been exposed to English for eleven years. Shortly after beginning *Almayer’s Folly*, he started keeping a diary in English as well, published in two parts as “The Congo Diary” and the “Up-river Book,” both were commenced in 1890.<sup>8</sup>

In 1896, Conrad married the English Jessie George with whom he had two sons. Neither his wife nor any of his children ever learned Polish and in this way, Conrad created an English home for himself. As a consequence, he developed a more intimate relation to the language, which made it more and more natural to write in English than in any other language.

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<sup>6</sup> The East Coast here is that of England, as the notes to the volume explain: “On 10 June 1878 Conrad arrived at Lowestoft and set foot on English soil for the first time. In the next three months, he made three round trips between Lowestoft and Newcastle in the *Skimmer of the Sea*, a coastal coal schooner.” (p. 211, n. 4)

<sup>7</sup> Mégroz asked Conrad how he could have learned the “subtleties of the language” from the uneducated crews of colliery barges, and recollects the following answer: “‘After hearing it spoken and when I could talk enough, I read,’ he replied. ‘I have still a thick, green-covered volume of Shakespeare I bought with my first earnings. It had beastly print, but it had everything in it, including the sonnets. I had read the whole of Shakespeare by 1880 and I re-read him in the following years. While I was at sea there was another book I used to read a lot, and it pulled my English together. That was Mill’s *Political Economy*. It was most interesting, but also it was an excellent soporific – Mills charms your mind to sleep. But perhaps I could say I learnt English by reading the newspapers. I learnt a great deal from the old *Standard* when it was under Mudford’” (210).

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that Conrad wrote these diaries in English notwithstanding the fact that he was traveling through Congo where the official language was French, a language Conrad spoke well.

Yet, in spite of Conrad's increased mastery of English in terms of vocabulary, syntax, and rhythm, he retained a strong accent in English throughout his life, something that has drawn much critical attention. Ford Madox Ford, Conrad's sometime friend and collaborator, wrote that "he spoke English with great fluency and distinction, with correctitude in his syntax, his words absolutely exact as to meaning but his accentuation so faulty that he was at times difficult to understand and his use of adverbs as often as not eccentric" (29). John Galsworthy recollected that when he first met Conrad on board an English ship, "[h]e spoke to me with a strong foreign accent" (62), and gave as an example Conrad's remark about a former crew member: "I likéd that old fellow, you know" (63).

Edwin Pugh too remembered meeting Conrad at "some literary dinner," and being struck by his "strong inflexion of a foreign accent which ne never overcame" (96-97). Conrad's close friend and literary mentor Edward Garnett recalled that when Conrad read out to him "some newly written manuscript pages of *An Outcast of the Islands* he mispronounced so many words that I followed him with difficulty. I found that he had never once heard these English words spoken, but had learned them all from books!" (15).

Conrad was sensitive about his pronunciation. His wife recalled that once, after an argument with his literary agent Brand Pinker during which Pinker exclaimed that Conrad should speak English if he could, Conrad shouted: "Speak English! ... what does he call all I have written?" (quoted in Pousada 345). He could not forget the insult and in a letter to Pinker wrote: "As it can't have escaped your recall that the last time we met you told me that I did not speak English to you I have asked Robert Garnett to be my

mouthpiece at any rate till my speech improves sufficiently to be acceptable” (ibid). Similarly, Conrad’s son Borys recalled his father pronouncing “iodine” as “you’re a-dyin,” frightening him out of his wits (Pousada 344).

Linguists point out that an accent says nothing about competency: one can be fluently bilingual and still retain a heavy accent. The psycholinguist François Grosjean cites Conrad as an example of this phenomenon (which, in fact, linguists call “the Joseph Conrad phenomenon”):<sup>9</sup>

There is a longstanding myth that real bilinguals have no accent in their different languages. Joseph Conrad and many other bilinguals, in all domains of life, show how unfounded this myth is. Having a “foreign” accent in one or more languages is, in fact, the norm for bilinguals; not having one is the exception. There is no relationship between one’s knowledge of a language and whether one has an accent in it (“Bilinguals and Accents,” blogpost).

An accent does, however, have an impact on how someone’s fluency is perceived – we will see this in the discussion of Nabokov’s novel *Pnin* in chapter four.

This may be why so much critical attention has focused on instances where Conrad’s Polish and French interfere with his written English. These observations are often justified, identifying instances especially in his earlier works, when Conrad’s English is awkward. Amy Houston gives a few examples of Gallicisms from *Almayer’s Folly*. Conrad renders the French phrase “fauteuil boiteux” literally, as “lame armchairs,” and translates the French “accès de,” as in an “attack of” (a certain disease for instance) as “access of” (109). Similarly, Conrad “exhibits signs of hyper-correction in retranslating the original French ‘chaise-longue’ into English as ‘long easy-chair’” (Houston 109).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, in his story “Amy Foster” we find the interesting sentence,

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. for instance Michael Lucas’ article “Language Acquisition and the Conrad Phenomenon.”

<sup>10</sup> Although “hyper-correction” is not quite the right term here. Rather, it is an unnecessary translation.



“Conceive you the kind of an existence over-shadowed, oppressed, by the everyday material appearances, as if by the visions of a nightmare” (166). The “Explanatory Notes” to the *Oxford World’s Classics* edition of the story explain that “Conceive you” is “one of Conrad’s occasional Gallicisms [...] Instead of the English ‘Can you imagine...?’, he gives a literal translation of the French ‘Concevez-vous’” (228). However, the sentence does not seem to be intended as a question in Conrad’s story. Rather, Conrad seems to mean something like, “imagine the kind of an existence.”

With regard to Polish interference, Amy Houston cites Czeslaw Milosz, who wrote that a Polish reader of Conrad’s work “has a strange feeling as he trips constantly over things that have a familiar ring. Certain themes, and even the rhythms of certain passages in his novels, are reminiscent of verse lines very close to him” (110). Yet at times the critics seem a little harsh on Conrad’s English. Mary Morzinski has written a detailed and very interesting study on the *Linguistic Influence of Polish on Joseph Conrad’s Style*, explaining clearly the grammatical differences between Polish and English, and showing how, why and where Polish underlies Conrad’s English. Her examples are fascinating. Whereas in Polish, as in the other Slavic languages, aspect (the grammatical category that expresses the way in which time is denoted by the verb) is a “major distinguishing characteristic” (19), in English, as in the other Germanic languages, tense is more important. As a result, Conrad had problems with temporal distinctions in English, resulting in awkward sentences such as “Flora had been staying at the cottage several times before,” in his novel *Chance* (138, quoted in Morzinski 59), or, in *Almayer’s Folly*, “I dragged him by the feet; in through the mud I have dragged him (92, quoted in Morzinski 56).

Another troublesome area for Conrad was word order. Morzinski has explained that “Polish is an inflected language, meaning that the grammatical identification of a word (person, number, case, tense) is built into the form, or morphology. English, on the other hand, has lost its inflections and relies upon word order to determine who did what to whom” (20). As a consequence, Conrad often had trouble with English word order, transferring the “flexibility of Polish word order” into English and creating odd sounding sentences: ““And Captain Lingard has lots of money,’ would say Mr. Vinck solemnly” (*Almayer’s Folly* 6, quoted in Morzinski 111); “We have had orders secretly and in the night to take off from this islet a man and a woman” (*Almayer’s Folly* 193, quoted in Morzinski 113); “He had spent in good company a nice, noisy evening” (*Outcast* 8, quoted in Morzinski 115). However, some of Morzinski’s examples seem the outcome of an overly zealous search for mistakes: I think these are either not awkward at all, or in such a way that had they been written by a native writer, they would have been considered literary or poetic language.

Morzinski gives the following sentence as an example of erroneous verb use: “I have heard the whisper of his voice when he spoke through the smoke of the morning fire to that woman with big eyes and a pale skin” (*Outcast* 48-9, quoted in Morzinski 59), whereas to me this seems perfectly fine English.<sup>11</sup> The following sentences she gives as examples of incorrect word order: “To this girl Nina often spoke” (*Almayer’s Folly* 38, quoted in Morzinski 112); “Of these experiences he was unwilling to speak” (“Amy Foster” 216, quoted in Morzinski 113); “To the captain he is faithful like a friend” (*Lord Jim* 4, quoted in Morzinski 113). To me these phrases do not seem mistakes so much as stylistic decisions. They might be slightly odd English, but it might be odd in the sense

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<sup>11</sup> Although I am, of course, not a native speaker of English myself and might be wrong.

that a lot of literary language is odd, or poetic, or playful. We find impossible sentences in Henry James (a random example, from “The Tree of Knowledge:” ““Oh yes, *he* must sell,’ the boys mother, who was still more, however, this seemed to give out, the Master’s wife, rather artlessly allowed” (233)), yet no critic would dare to doubt his linguistic competence.<sup>12</sup> Had Conrad written “tender is the night,” it would probably have been pointed out as another typical instance of Conrad’s awkward English, because surely any native speaker would have known that the correct form of this phrase would be “the night is tender.” When a writer chooses not to write in his mother tongue, his language is the object of much more scrutiny than that of a native speaker is.

Although there are times when Conrad’s other languages interfere with his English, I think this is not so much, or not just, a sign of diminished fluency or lessened competency, as a natural consequence of his bilingualism. As we saw, Conrad was uncomfortably aware of his own accent, yet at the same time he emphasized that English had become completely natural to him. In a letter to Hugh Walpole he observes that he had started thinking in English long before he wrote *Almayer’s Folly*. Walpole had written that Conrad “thought in Polish, arranged his thoughts in French, and expressed them in English.” Conrad was piqued and replied “I began to think in English long before I mastered, I won’t say the style (I haven’t done that yet), but the mere uttered speech” (quoted in Pousada 339). Similarly, in his “Author’s Note” to a *Personal Record* he writes, “The truth of the matter is that my faculty to write in English is as natural as any other aptitude with which I might have been born” (200).

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<sup>12</sup> An anonymous early reviewer of James’s *The American*, did observe that this novel comes “perilously near being a French novel,” but the reviewer was referring to James’ characters (who are “utterly detestable”) and not to his wielding of the English language (“Recent Fiction” 29-30).

Although English would never be native to Conrad, writing in English, it seems, felt natural. This makes sense since, as we saw above, by the time he started writing his first novel in English he had been constantly exposed to the language for eleven years. His biographer Zdzislaw Najder explains: “for eleven years he had been in daily contact with English-speaking people, he spoke English, read English books, he even gradually accepted the English point of view on political matters” (116). Moreover, it would probably have become unnatural for him to write in Polish. When he left Poland in 1874, he was sixteen. He visited his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski in the Ukraine twice,<sup>13</sup> in 1890 and 1893, and he returned to Poland only once during his lifetime, in 1914.<sup>14</sup> Thus, from the moment he left, Conrad had little opportunity to maintain the language. He never lost his Polish, but it did deteriorate.

When he was in Poland, friends and family noticed that “he talked Polish, but occasionally lacking a word he would replace it with an English or French expression” (quoted in Pousada 346), and it seems that the Polish syntax of Conrad’s letters to relatives in Poland deteriorated, so that for complex arguments he actually avoided Polish (Pousada 348). Conrad’s uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski commented dryly in a letter that Conrad’s Polish was “not bad” and encouraged him to write for a Warsaw journal as “an exercise in your native tongue,” implying that such an exercise would have been welcome (Najder 70). Conrad “did not even consider his Polish to be up to the task of translating his own works from English and left that to a young Polish cousin” (Pousada 340). When a journalist once asked Conrad why he did not write in Polish, he answered:

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<sup>13</sup> Conrad himself was born in the Ukraine as well, in Berdyczów, in central Ukraine. This area used to be Polish but was then under Russian rule.

<sup>14</sup> While Conrad and his wife were in Poland, the first World War broke out and they had to flee to the mountains to stay safe. Wealthy friends smuggled them out and helped them return to England unscathed.

“I value our Polish literature too highly to introduce my incompetent piping” (Morzinski 37). It seems likely that gradually Conrad’s Polish was getting rusty – we will see in chapter three that Beckett found himself in a similar situation. Conrad’s Polish became less accessible, while English was becoming increasingly dominant, blocking access to his native Polish. Thus, he might have had a practical motive for not writing in his native language.

In the following pages, many of the issues involved in the “Conrad case” will return, and will, hopefully, be elucidated by the findings of cross-linguistic research.

# Chapter One

## The Peculiarity of Bilingual Writers:

### Neuro- and Psycholinguistic Aspects of Multilingualism

Neurolinguists, beware! The bilingual is not two monolinguals in one person.

François Grosjean

In 1989 there appeared a book that could have deeply affected the way literary critics read bilingual writers: Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour's *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the "First" Emigration*. Beaujour used research on bilingualism from the fields of neuro- and psycholinguistics as a tool for analyzing multilingual writers and yielded fascinating results. Nearly every critic working on bilingual (Russian) writers since the publication of her book cites Beaujour's findings, but nobody seems to have continued her kind of work. This might be because cross-linguistic studies tend to be rather technical and can be difficult to follow for non-linguists. It could also be because the results of these studies are often not conclusive and at times downright contradictory, or because neuro- and psycholinguistic research of bilingualism is such a fast evolving field that it is hard to keep up.<sup>15</sup> Yet Beaujour's book shows that there is a wealth of insights to be gained from linguistic theory.

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<sup>15</sup> In *Neurolinguistics: An Introduction to Spoken Language Processing and its Disorders* (2007), John Ingram refers to the "the jungle that is the interdisciplinary research into the language-brain relationship"

## Lateralization in Bilinguals: Enough Already!

Because of the rapid developments in multilingualism studies, much has changed in the nearly twenty-five years since *Alien Tongues* appeared and many of the findings from the seventies and eighties, on which Beaujour relied in her analyses, have been overturned or modified. The development, in the nineties, of non-invasive brain-scanning methods (“functional neuroimaging techniques”) allows for a better, and different, understanding of the multilingual brain’s anatomical and functional structures and has made the multilingual brain less of a “terra incognita” than it was twenty years ago (Grosjean, *Life with Two Languages* 267).<sup>16</sup> To quote the psycholinguist Annette de Groot:

The emergence of functional neuroimaging techniques in the last decade of the twentieth century boosted research in this field [the study of the brain structures that subserve bilingual and multilingual functioning] and the results of the pertinent studies have refined and extended the conclusions drawn from earlier neuropsychological and behavioral studies probing in to the brain basis of bilingualism (405).<sup>17</sup>

Where earlier neurolinguistic research depended in large part on the study of damaged brains for deciphering the workings of the linguistic brain, often using invasive experimentations which for obvious ethical reasons could not be used on healthy human subjects (or, in even earlier times, by studying the brains of the deceased), the devising of neuroimaging techniques, which contain no danger to subjects’ health, allows researchers

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(xix). This jungle becomes even more daunting when dealing with the language-brain relationship in bilinguals and multilinguals.

<sup>16</sup> Although it does gradually become less of a “terra incognita,” it’s good to keep in mind that the brain is all the same still pretty incognitus. Damiaan Denys, a Dutch psychiatrist and philosopher connected to the Amsterdam Academic Medical centre and specialized in deep brain stimulation for psychiatric patients suffering from obsessive compulsive disorders, recently said in the *NRC* (a leading Dutch newspaper): “We weten net zo weinig van de hersenen als van het heelal, minder dan 1 procent” (“We know as little about the brain as we do about the universe, less than 1 per cent”). Or, in the words of P.H. Matthews, “we are all outsiders when it comes to the grey matter in our heads” and we should be “careful to jump to conclusions about something we have not designed and do not understand” (115, 123).

<sup>17</sup> Ping Li dates the first paper based on findings with an fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) machine in 1991 (Li, “Neurolinguistic and Neurocomputational Models” 221).

to study the “intact living brain” (Li, “Neurolinguistic and Neurocomputational Models” 220), and this has changed the field dramatically.

Until the development of neuroimaging techniques, arguably the most important topic of research into bilingualism concerned brain lateralization. This question is related to the search, ongoing since the nineteenth century, for the localization of language in the brain. The principal discovery with respect to the brain areas involved in understanding and producing language came from the research of Paul Broca who, in 1861, discovered that a patient who suffered massive damage in the brain’s left hemisphere’s third frontal convolution was severely compromised in his speech. From this, Broca concluded that we are left lateralized for language (“Nous parlons avec l’hémisphère gauche” (Fabbro 32)).

Contrary to what people had believed since Aristotle, this suggested that our brains are not symmetrically organized and thus that language is not bilaterally represented (Fabbro 32). Building on Broca’s work, in the 1870s Carl Wernicke located another important language centre, also in the left hemisphere but a little further back from Broca’s area, involved in speech comprehension. These two areas are referred to as “Broca’s area” and “Wernicke’s area,” and the patterns of linguistic disorder following lesions in these areas are described as “Broca’s aphasia” and “Wernicke’s aphasia.”

Since the research of Broca and Wernicke, it has become widely accepted in linguistics and beyond that all but a small minority of people are left lateralized for language. The first serious inquiries into the consequences of bilingualism for our cerebral organization of language built on this assumption. One of the most influential early bilingualism studies, Loraine K. Obler and Martin L. Albert’s *The Bilingual Brain*:



*Neuropsychological and Neurolinguistic Aspects of Bilingualism* (1978), proposed that unlike monolingual speakers, bilinguals are less left lateralized for language. According to Obler and Albert, a bilingual person's linguistic functions are, "more often than in monolinguals, represented, to some extent at least, in the right hemisphere of the brain" (Gardner Chloros 127).

The idea "that the languages of bilingual speakers are less asymmetrically represented in the cerebral hemisphere than the languages of monolingual speakers" became an influential hypothesis (Wei 375). It captivated the "scientific imagery of many researchers" (Fabbro 210) and grew into one of the most controversial and most widely discussed issues in neuro- and psycholinguistic studies of bilingualism. In recent years however, especially since the advance of neuroimaging techniques, the majority of linguists are critical of the bilateralization hypothesis. A very vocal opponent of the theory is Michel Paradis who, in his article "Language lateralization in bilinguals: enough already!" complains that the "obstinacy" with which linguists continue to look for differences in hemispheric asymmetry between bilinguals and monolinguals "is nothing short of astounding" (394).

The problem with the studies that try to prove laterality differences in bilinguals is, according to Paradis, not only that they are too specific ("Decreased asymmetry has been claimed to hold (exclusively) for just about every possible subgroup of bilinguals and its opposite," (394) for example in "proficient female late acquirers in informal settings, provided they keep their eyes closed (Moss *et al.*, 1985) or block one nostril (Shannahoff-Khalsa, 1984)" (396)) but also that the results are contradictory and there is no clinical evidence (394). Although most linguists are not as fiercely critical of these

studies as Paradis (who ends his article by asking exasperatedly: “How many additional repeated failures to demonstrate differential laterality in increasingly specific subgroups of bilinguals will it take for neuropsychologists to move on to something more productive?” (401)), the prevailing opinion does seem to be that bilateralization cannot be demonstrated convincingly in bilinguals.<sup>18</sup>

A problem with the early studies, which tried to discover where the different languages of bilingual speakers are localized in the brain, is that they were all conducted with aphasic patients. Following the findings of Paul Broca, it was assumed “that the study of the various patterns of dissociation between the languages of bilingual aphasic patients should provide us with a window on the organization of two languages in the same brain” (Paradis, *A Neurolinguistic Theory of Bilingualism* 3). Because some bilingual patients who had suffered brain lesions displayed differential or selective patterns of language loss and/or recovery (Kutas et al. 290), i.e. losing for instance the loss of one language but not the other, it was thought that the two languages must be represented in different areas of the brain.

Today however, researchers have looked at these studies critically. The linguist P.H. Matthews suggests, for instance, that we cannot assume that the way the brain works

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Li Wei for instance, who writes: “the lateralization of language in the brains of the two groups [monolinguals and bilinguals] is similar” (13), or Annette de Groot: “To reconcile a specific pattern of results with the (most popular) hypothesis that the right hemisphere is more involved in language processing in bilinguals than in monolinguals, the hypothesis has been narrowed down *ad absurdum* to extremely restricted subgroups of people” (*Language and Cognition* 429). In fact, Paradis mentions that even Loraine Obler who, in the *Bilingual Brain*, first put forth the theory of different lateralization for bilinguals, later was less decided about the findings of differential lateralization and points towards discrepancies in the research, in an article written together with Robert J. Zatorre, Linda Galloway and Jyotsna Vaid, “Cerebral lateralization in bilinguals: methodological issues.” Franco Fabbro argues that the right hemisphere might be more involved in bilingual language use when a second language is just being acquired or is used infrequently (211). Paradis goes further yet and claims that in fact, using the right hemisphere for second language acquisition “might be a main factor in failure to acquire native-like proficiency since, once higher proficiency has been attained, greater asymmetry is reported” (400).

when it is damaged is the way it would work normally minus, as it were, whatever used to go on in the parts affected. This might be rather like investigating, say, how people hold things by observing how they do it when one arm is amputated (124).<sup>19</sup>

Matthews adds: “It could be that the damage we locate affects a ‘pathway,’ as brain scientists describe it, in a system that is actually very diffuse” (123). The results of noninvasive brain imaging studies show that this might in fact be very much how it works.

The most important neuroimaging techniques are functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), which uses strong magnetic fields created by an fMRI machine to infer neuronal activity by measuring hemodynamic changes in blood flow and in this way can determine where in the brain linguistic activity takes place, and Event Related Potential (ERP), which measures the brain’s continuous electrical activities on millisecond by millisecond basis (Li, “Neurolinguistic and Neurocomputational Models” 221-222). Ping Li explains that these two techniques are complementary. fMRI measures hemodynamic changes, which occur slowly – it takes a few seconds for blood to flow and reach its destination. ERP’s on the other hand have good temporal resolution but are not very exact when it comes to spatial resolution. Together these two methods “offer increased spatial and temporal precision in the mapping of language phenomena and as such show great promise in deepening and refining our understanding of neural correlates of

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<sup>19</sup> Matthews compares the study of damaged brains for the purpose of better understanding our cerebral organization for language to a city’s electric system that has been destroyed because a storm has brought down a major power line: “The repair may take days, and meanwhile nothing that depends on the supply works. It does not follow, however, that since the line is down, and the power supply has gone dead, the place where the electricity is generated must be where the storm struck” (122). Gazzaniga et al use a similar analogy: “allowing the spark plugs to decay or cutting the line distributing the gas to the pistons will cause an automobile to stop running, but this does not mean that spark plugs and distributors do the same thing; rather, their removal has similar functional consequences” (quoted in de Groot, *Language and Cognition* 407).

language processing” (Hull and Vaid 492). In this way, as Ellen Bialystok put it, “cognition can be made visible” (Bialystok, *Bilingualism in Development* 91) or at least we can investigate “the spatial and temporal mechanisms of cognitive functioning” (Abutalebi et al. 497).

Neuroimaging studies indicate not only that there is little or no support for greater right hemisphere representation in bilingual speakers,<sup>20</sup> but also suggest that the representation of linguistic functions in the brain is much more complex than at first assumed for monolinguals and bilinguals alike. There *is* lateralization in the brain, but it is less fixed and more flexible than previously thought. The role of Wernicke’s area, for example, is not just the processing of language comprehension but is more varied, and the same is true for Broca’s area (Bialystok, *Bilingualism in Development*). Similarly, although many important linguistic functions take place in the left cerebral hemisphere, neuroimaging techniques show that the non-language dominant cerebral hemisphere is also involved in the organization of communication (Fabbro 46).

The neurolinguist Franco Fabbro explains that non-linguistic components of verbal communication (the production and comprehension of metaphors, proverbs and sarcasm for instance), the comprehension of high-frequency words, words that can be easily visually imagined, and concrete words all take place in the right hemisphere. The right hemisphere is also involved in affective prosody, voice intonation, and the melodic and intonational properties of language. Thus, both for bilinguals and monolinguals the right hemisphere is active in linguistic production as well as the left hemisphere, but “where the left hemisphere focally activates in the language areas only, the right

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. for instance Marta Kutas, Eva Moreno, Nicole Wicha 291

hemisphere activates globally and diffusely” (Fabbro 46).<sup>21</sup> We do not *just* speak “avec l’hémisphère gauche.”

Moreover, the brain scanning studies have resulted in researchers emphasizing the fact that the way our brain is organized for language is not fixed but changes throughout the course of one’s life. Vivian Cook explains: “An important shift in scientific thinking in the past few decades has been the realization that the human brain is not static but can be changed by experience” (5). Other researchers too have noted that the brain is much more plastic than previously thought. Annette de Groot observes in *Language and Cognition in Bilinguals and Multilinguals*, a study that appeared in 2012, that the neural substrate involved in language changes throughout a person’s lifetime: “the various languages in the bilingual and multilingual language system all interact with one another,” and, as a consequence “the overall language system is in a continuous state of flux” (341).

The cerebral organization for language changes depending on how much a language is used, causing languages to grow more or less accessible to the speaker. De Groot explains:

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. also Hull and Vaid, “Clearing the Cobwebs from the Study of the Bilingual Brain,” 492. Ping Li summarizes the reasons for rejecting the lateralization approach to language as follows. First of all, lesions in the same brain regions do not necessarily lead to the same type of symptoms. Secondly, Broca and Wernicke’s areas are both in the left hemisphere, yet we now know that the right hemisphere also place a crucial role in many aspects of language, especially with regard to acoustic and phonological processing. Moreover, recent neuroimaging findings suggest that not just cortical but also subcortical structures are involved in language processing in crucial ways. (Fabbro notes that “the basal ganglia and the left thalamus are also involved in the semantic, grammatical, and phonemic control of units to be uttered. Furthermore, other brain structures, such as the cerebellum, which were once considered to be involved exclusively in motor control, are also involved in the regulation of cognitive functions” (79) For example, the “right cerebellar hemisphere” writes Fabbro, “(which is directly connected to the left cerebellar hemisphere) seems to play an important role in word-selection tasks. Neural structures underlying the cerebral cortex are thus crucial for the regulation of language, but further research is needed to establish their functions clearly” (ibid)) Finally, new brain regions previously not considered in the classic language model are now revealed (Li, “Neurolinguistic and Neurocomputational Models” 216)

true bilingualism or multilingualism, in which the different translation equivalent words for one and the same concept all remain accessible, requires that all languages, including the L1 [or native language], are maintained permanently. If an earlier language is neglected it will be overwritten or suppressed over time by the new language (356).

In an essay that appeared in a 2009 collection *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity*, edited by Isabelle de Courtivron, Eva Hoffman describes a poet friend who was taken from his native Russia to Israel as a child. On the way to Israel, he had spent some time in a refugee camp in Germany and quickly acquired German. After a few years in Israel, he found that he remembered German quite well, but his Russian, a language in which, Hoffman reports, “he had been articulate and precociously literate” was gone (50). “‘I killed it,’ he said. ‘I almost remember the decision to do it – to murder the Russian within me’” (50). The “almost” is interesting here, as it implies that he does not, in fact, remember taking such a decision at all.

Perhaps imagining that he lost his Russian on purpose gave him a sense of control, or lessened the feeling of powerlessness he experienced over losing his mother tongue. Hoffman explains it like this: “It was Russian, his first, loved language, that presented the threat, that would have interfered with his project of becoming a writer in Hebrew. German, with its more neutral significance, could remain intact” – also implying that the forgetting of Russian was something conscious, something deliberate (50).

Neurolinguistic research suggests, however, that this process not only takes place below consciousness but also that it is unexpectedly common. (Grosjean suggests that although language forgetting is a phenomenon that has received little attention, it is “probably as frequent as language learning in adults” (*Life with Two Languages* 238). De Groot writes: “One might wonder whether, unlike a language acquired later in life, the

first and native language is relatively immune to forgetting” but this, unfortunately, is not the case. The evidence of studies that “looked at the durability of unused L1 knowledge” show that the native language “is as susceptible to loss (or inaccessibility) as an L2” (353). De Groot cites research by Isurin (2000, p. 164) that suggests that “in a pure attrition situation, where a person loses any contact with L1, the process of L1 forgetting might be directly determined by L2 acquisition, and accessibility of lexical items in L1 might be affected by the acquisition of L2 equivalents for the same concepts” (356).

Interestingly, Hoffman connects her own diminished fluency in Polish (after her move from Poland to Canada as a teenager) to neurolinguistic insights:

I wanted Polish silenced, so that I could make room within myself for English. Perhaps the stratagem was partly of a cognitive nature. Neurological research suggests that a second language is not as ‘deeply’ encoded in the brain as the first; and I think I could almost concretely feel this, sense the insufficient attachment of English words to my interiority, my psychic cells and sensory perceptions – to what may have been in fact the dendrites and neural networks along which language travels or with in which it lodges itself. So perhaps by displacing Polish, I was trying to free some neural trajectories to which English signals and syntax attach themselves. For I badly wanted English to stick (50).

Like the poet described above, Hoffman too tries to introduce a degree of consciousness, of deliberateness in her process of language forgetting – a process that can be extremely painful. That her neurological explanation is not entirely correct does not matter, what matters is the fact that she tries to find a reason for what seems so improbable: the fact that we can forget our mother tongue.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> A little later Hoffman attempts a more psychoanalytical explanation. Describing her return to Polish after a “twenty-year hiatus,” she writes: “how badly I spoke it for a while! I stuttered in it, repeatedly made mistakes I would never have made as a child, kept forgetting and reforgetting the simplest expressions,” and concludes, “it was as if the initial act of repression, of linguistic self-mutilation, was now expressing itself in these verbal tics and symptoms. The return of the repressed is never smooth” (52-53).

In sum, even one's first language can become inaccessible if it is gradually being replaced by a second language. As we shall see in the following chapters, this might have been just as important a reason for authors like Nabokov and Beckett to switch languages as the reasons they gave themselves, or the reasons literary critics have pointed out so far. (And it might have been an important reason for Conrad to decide to write in English rather than in his native Polish.)

### **The Plastic Brain**

While it was long established that mammals, unlike, for instance, reptiles, are born with very immature brains, the plasticity of which allowed them to learn more than “a strongly genetically preprogrammed brain (typical of reptiles)” (Fabbro 90), it was believed that once the brain's development was complete and brain lateralization had been accomplished, the brain's functions were quite fixed.

In this idea originated the “critical period hypothesis,” the theory that children can only acquire complete native proficiency in their mother tongue during a limited time frame, because once brain lateralization is complete, “the language function is settled in the left hemisphere” (Li, “Successive Language Acquisition” 146). The critical period hypothesis was controversial from the start and was always subject to many different interpretations (with some researchers claiming it ends at puberty, whereas others maintained it happens somewhere between the ages of two and five), but today the critical period is no longer a given in the field of bilingualism studies. Individual variations in language learning are too vast and scientific data too inconclusive to support any conclusive theory regarding a clear window of opportunity for acquiring full native



linguistic competence. Ellen Bialystok notes, “a correlation between age of learning and ultimate success is not, *prima facie*, evidence for a critical period” (*Bilingualism in Development* 74). At most, “it may be that a critical period applies to phonology but not to other aspects of language,” such as syntax and morphology (80). Bialystok and Raluca Barac observe: Contrary to earlier views in which the capabilities of the mind were considered to be fixed, evidence for the impact of bilingualism on mental functioning across the lifespan demonstrates the essential flexibility and plasticity of the mind (209-210). Although the brain *is* more plastic at the beginning of life, “our brains are also living structures, always changing and adapting to the demands of the environment; thus, provided sufficiently extended exposure, significant changes can be induced” (Sebastián-Gallés and Bosch 68). Or, in the words of Franco Fabbro, “the brain is capable of learning!” (91)

Fabbro explains that the “most reasonable hypothesis” claims that,

following learning, functional and structural modifications occur in specific cerebral structures [...] Repeated electric stimulation of a neural circuit reduces the energy needed to activate it, which means that the circuit has undergone a functional modification, thus reducing the activation threshold (90).

Kutas et al. cite the research of Perani and Abutalebi from 2005, which maintains that “the brain areas involved in language learning change throughout the course of learning much as they do for non-language learning” (293). Thus, learning a second language “alters both the anatomical and the functional organization of the brain” in such a way that there can be found “a significant increase in grey matter density in the left inferior parietal cortex of bilinguals relative to monolinguals – greater with earlier L2 [second

language] exposure and greater L2 fluency - as a specific instance of experience-dependent brain plasticity” (289).<sup>23</sup>

These changes can happen even after a very short period of exposure to a second language. Vivian Cook cites the title of a paper by Kwok et al. from 2011: “Learning new colour names produces rapid increase in gray matter in the intact adult human cortex,” and adds “this effect was visible after people had learnt new colour words for one hour 48 minutes spread over 3 days” (5). This is not only true for color names: Cook also reports “measurable changes in Event Related Potentials (ERPs) after people have been taught French words for 14 hours (McLaughlin, 2004) (ibid).” He further describes, “using a variety of brain measurement techniques, Osterhout et al. (2008) found that ‘structural changes ... can be observed after a relatively short but intense instructional period’, namely first year French at a US university” (ibid).

This kind of research indicates “that some effects of learning a second language can be immediate, though it is not clear whether these brain changes persist” (ibid). Other scientists have found similar results. Ping Li mentions experiments in which subjects “who learned a second language, as compared to monolingual participants, had increased gray

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<sup>23</sup> Fabbro explains how this works. Following learning, functional and structural modifications occur in specific cerebral structures (90), and significant structural modifications of synapses at anatomical and biochemical levels have been observed as a consequence of learning. For instance, an increase in the number of receptors for a given neurotransmitter has been observed, as has an increase in the size of dendritic spines. (Dendritic spines are small protrusions from a neuron’s dendrite. They contain receptors for neurotransmission, and signaling systems that are important for synaptic function and plasticity (cf. for instance Nimchinsky EA, Sabatini BL, Svoboda K., “Structure and function of dendritic spines,” in: *Annual Review of Physiology*, 2002, 64:3, pp. 13-53.) Dendrites are the branched extensions on the front of a neuron that receive the electrochemical impulse from the axons of other neurons and channel it to the soma, or cell body, of the neuron. When a signal comes into the neuron from any of its hundreds of dendrites, a chemical reaction starts in the neuron’s nucleus. Molecules in the nucleus become electrically charged and build up energy. When the chemicals are charged up sufficiently, they create a tiny blast that travels out into the axon, the projection on the end of the neuron that transmits electrical impulses away from the soma. There, the impulse hits neurotransmitter molecules stored in a compartment called a vesicle. When neurotransmitters are hit by an impulse they fire through the wall of the axon terminal and across the synapse. When they have crossed the synapse, they smash into the dendrites of another neuron. This is how communication takes place in the brain (cf. for instance Harvey Newquist 85-95)).

matter density in the left parietal cortex [...] as a function of both AoA [age of acquisition] and proficiency (the earlier the L2 is learned, the higher the density; the more proficient the learner, the higher the density)” (“Neurolinguistic and Neurocomputational Models” 222).

Thus, our brains are not fixed, but are formed, and continue to be formed throughout our lives, by our linguistic experiences.

### **Speech Forced into Languages?**

Although, as we have seen, many of the facts and much of the nature of cross-linguistic research into bilingualism has changed since the publication of Beaujour’s study, the most important thing has stayed the same. The point of departure of *Alien Tongues* is that bilingual writers are in many ways fundamentally different from monolingual writers; that this difference starts at the level of their cerebral organization for language; that therefore bilingual writers should be studied in their linguistic complexity, as a group apart and not in comparison with monolingual writers; and that, because their bilingualism leaves significant traces in their written language, an understanding of the neurolinguistic substrate of language is essential for gaining a better comprehension of the writings of bilingual authors.

These issues are, I think, as valid today as they were twenty-five years ago. Most contemporary neuro- and psycholinguists agree that “linguistic expressions of bilinguals and multilinguals differ from those of monolinguals” and that “bilingualism and multilingualism affect language functioning” (de Groot 340). Beaujour reviewed the insights of psycho- and neurolinguistics and noted that this background is “essential to any serious attempt to understand how bilingual writers actually function, and many of

the findings of neurolinguistics are in fact very helpful in analyzing the practice of bilingual writers” (24).

In what follows, I will, as it were, re-review the field and lay out those findings that are most relevant for the understanding of bilingual writers, explaining some of the terms I will be drawing on in the rest of the dissertation. I will in no way pretend to give a full history of neuro- and psycholinguistic research into bilingualism of the past decades, nor will I be able to give a complete map to the thinking about the topic. The discussion will be entirely instrumental to my analyses of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov, three writers who were self-consciously, even militantly bilingual. I will simply try to unfold the scientific ideas from linguistics about bilingualism in relation to the issues that these writers took up, both explicitly and implicitly.

In her account of neurolinguistic research Beaujour includes a caveat:

as the most sophisticated neuro- and psycholinguistic researchers admit, there are often methodological problems with scientific research on bilinguals because of the daunting array of significant variables which may influence differential cerebral organization for languages and even the cerebral localization of languages (24).

Although, as we have seen, today localization is no longer a topic considered worthy of investigation by most linguists, the general gist of Beaujour’s warning still holds: individual bilingualism is determined by so many different variables that it is hard, if not impossible, to control for all of them. Aneta Pavlenko notes that, because of this, scientists tend to see bilinguals as “undesirable and ‘messy’ subjects who should be excluded from experimental research to eliminate intervening variables” (“Bilingualism and Thought” 437). Similarly, John Edwards describes that in the past, linguists “tried to

ignore language variation” because it was seen “as a nuisance, as something that got in the way of their work of describing language” (15).

This is one reason why bilingualism is a topic that for a long time was ignored by the majority of linguists: the complex scientific data it introduced discouraged researchers. In *Code-switching*, Penelope Gardner Chloros suggests that this was “because dealing with fuzziness appears less glamorous than findings based on supposed clarity” (167). Yet even linguists who are not deterred from the topic can be disheartened by the complicated methodological problems that bilingualism introduces. In a recent (2009) article on “Code-switching and the Brain,” the writers remark on the difficulty of brain research in general and add:

Research with bilinguals or polyglots is much harder still. If only researchers could ‘raise’ multi-language individuals in controlled environments, conducting parametric studies and manipulating all the linguistic factors now known to be important for language learning and use (Kutas et al. 304).

If only! Nonetheless, much of the research, in spite of the “fuzziness” of the topic, has yielded useful results.

In fact, one might argue that the messiness of bilingualism is precisely what makes it so fascinating. Where much of modern (monolingual) linguistic research takes for granted the existence of “language” per se, and, to the discontent of bilingualism researchers, treats “languages” “as if they were discrete, identifiable and internally consistent wholes,” forgetting “how historically recent and culturally selective such a view is” (Gardner Chloros 9), the research from the field of bilingualism studies does not proceed from the assumption of language as something uncomplicated.

Commenting on the inconclusiveness of bilingual differential lateralization experiments and the difficulty to “pin down the bilingual’s languages to different locations in the brain after numerous attempts,” Gardner Chloros suggests “that ‘languages’ as such might be the wrong units to be looking at, and that we should be looking instead at groupings of features, which vary from bilingual to bilingual, and are the building blocks of languages” (128). Examinations of bilingual subjects show that in fact their utterances are often not easily assignable to one language or another, which suggests that “the concept of separate and discrete ‘languages’” cannot be taken as a given (Gardner Chloros 141).<sup>24</sup> According to Gardner Chloros this shows that “the whole notion of separate language systems may be quite inappropriate” (175), and that language is really “speech forced into ‘languages’” (118).

The notion of what “language” is, runs as a red thread through many of the bilingualism studies. Remarking on the research that “aims to determine the nature of linguistic representation,” Ellen Bialystok notes that these studies follow three premises: “that language is a coherent entity;” “that its representation can be located in (mental) space;” and “that the representation has a discernible structure,” and concludes that in fact “there is no simple means of identifying what language is, so no obvious target for describing the nature of its representation” (*Bilingualism in Development* 99).

Similarly, in a paper addressing the relation of standard languages to the reality of perceived linguistic behavior in a number of varying case-histories, ranging from French and Italian to Tok Pisin, Swahili and Caribbean Creoles, the sociolinguist R.B. Le Page concludes that “the concept of a closed and finite rule-system is inadequate for the

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<sup>24</sup> Gardner Chloros gives the example of a fluent French-English bilingual, who observed “‘That’s a bit *ridiculeux*’ knowingly using a form which is neither ‘French’ nor ‘English’ (English *ridiculous*, French *ridicule*)” (141).

description of natural languages” and that “the concept of such rule-systems belongs instead to a world of stereotypes about language which are usually politically or ideologically motivated, and which must be constantly re-examined” (9).<sup>25</sup> The belief in such a rule-system, writes Le Page, dates from the sixties when, influenced by Chomsky (who famously claimed that “linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community” (4)) and his disciples,<sup>26</sup> “many were hypnotized into thinking of the idealized speaker-listener in a homogeneous community as the object of our study and the closed and finite rule-system generating an infinite set of sentences as the proper outcome” (19). Le Page continues:

It is not in the nature of human language for such objects to exist. The motivation which gives rise to such concepts as discrete, closed, finite rule-systems is to be distinguished from that which drives the need for self-expression and identification and communication, although there is clearly cross-over between the two. Natural language is inherently and necessarily a polysystemic and potentially infinite network of relationships with an unlimited capacity for analogical development and evolutionary changes, of which the development of writing is one (19).

Franco Fabbro suggests something similar to Le Page, when he discusses the notion that bilingual people are “considered to be only a very restricted number” (104), a notion he blames on the prevalence of standard languages and on the mistaken distinction between “language” and “dialect,” a distinction which, according to Fabbro, is political and “of no relevance to linguistic or neurolinguistic research and practice” (1): “a certain notion of state has resulted in a rather distorted view of the language issue, a view that

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<sup>25</sup> Le Page quotes, inter alia, the work of Adrian Battye, who described Italian as “as a standard language in search of speakers” (14).

<sup>26</sup> As Fabbro writes, “nowadays many linguistic departments in North America are run by Chomsky’s pupils” (8).

has been theorized by literati and linguists, generally more concerned with their academic or political career than with an unprejudiced study of speech and languages” (104).<sup>27</sup>

If concepts like language and dialect “cannot be scientifically defined” at a “neurolinguistic level” (Fabbro 103), and thus do not “exist” as such in the brain, and if they also, following Le Page cum suis, do not exist per se in the world of spoken language, then what are they, really? The bilingualism research asks uncomfortable and unsettling, but highly interesting questions relating to the nature of language, questions that are, I think, very compatible with the study of literature. In *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism*, Joshua Miller writes: “language is such a fundamental component of every day experience that it is rarely questioned” (27). He suggests, however, that the works of (multilingual) modernist writers *do* question language: “rather than acquiescing to the multilingualism-as-disunity thesis these works destabilize the conceptual terms themselves. They sabotage the tenets of linguistic standardization” (23).

Like bilingual subjects and the scientific data they generate, writers and books are messy too. No two are the same and many tend to raise uncomfortable questions to which an answer is rarely provided. Linguists want to be happy. Or at least, they want data that can make them happy, but the bilingualism research will not provide them with easy results. Instead, these studies ask disturbing questions about the nature of language, which, as we will see, make them very suitable to a reading of the multilingual works of Joyce, Beckett and Nabokov.

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<sup>27</sup> Of course, the present day view in linguistics that sees language as “speech forced in languages” and celebrates linguistic diversity is just as political, inspired by the current political moment when multilingualism and multiculturalism are generally accepted as the truth about society, the only possible way to see our world.



### **Chomsky and the “Monolingualistic Fallacy”**

As I wrote above, bilingualism scholars consider Chomsky in large part responsible for the negative view with which linguistics regarded bilingualism, and blame him for not having shown an interest in the topic. Linguists nowadays – at least those linguists working on bilingualism – believe that, unlike previously assumed, bilingualism is the norm rather than monolingualism. Almost every linguist I have encountered emphasizes the fact that more than half the world’s population is multilingual and that rather than a special case, an exception to the average, multilingualism is in fact the potential norm for all human beings: we are all capable of acquiring more than one language.

Gardner Chloros is one of many researchers who claims that most of the world is plurilingual. She writes that, when looking at the actual language situation of most countries in the world, “you are left with small islands of monolingualism in a multilingual sea” (7), an observation that is echoed by numerous linguists. Nevertheless, these researchers claim, modern linguistics is based on monolingual subjects whereas really “linguists should arrive their data and evidence from the most typical speakers rather than from more exceptional ones” (Gardner Chloros 5).

In an unpublished interview from the early nineties, François Grosjean, one of the first scholars to regard bilingualism to be the norm, asked Noam Chomsky why linguists like himself had spent so little time studying bilinguals, given that at least half the world’s population is bi- or multilingual. Chomsky did not deny the fact, but replied that multilingualism is simply too complicated to study.<sup>28</sup> He asked, “Why do chemists study H<sub>2</sub>O and not the stuff that you get out of the Charles River?” and answered the following himself:

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<sup>28</sup> François Grosjean, “Noam Chomsky on Bilingualism,” blogpost.

You assume that anything as complicated as what is in the Charles River will only be understandable, if at all, on the basis of discovery of the fundamental principles that determine the nature of all matter, and those you have to learn about by studying pure cases (Cook 10).

Chomsky added: “The only way to deal with the complexities of the real world is by studying pure cases and trying to determine from them the principles that interact in the complex cases” (Grosjean, “Noam Chomsky,” blogpost).

This is, of course, the common scientific method, yet bilingualism scholars take issue with this approach. Vivian Cook comments on Chomsky’s remarks: “This can be called the ‘purity’ argument for using monolinguals: an idealised mind with one language possesses a purer state of language knowledge than a mind with two or more” (10). Yet, Cook continues,

This would be denying its molecular nature as built up out of two elements. If the natural state of the human mind is the complex state of bilingualism, it is just as absurd to treat monolingualism as the norm. To change metaphors, it would be like basing the study of how humans walk on people with only one leg (ibid).

Of course, it is not undisputed that the natural state of the mind is bilingualism, and this last metaphor is not entirely convincing, but it does show the fierceness with which some bilingualism scholars object against Chomsky’s views.

According to the bilingualists, research from scholars like Chomsky sees the second language of a bilingual as something separate from the first, something simply added to the native language. Yet, as they claim, this ignores the complex interplay between a bilingual speaker’s different languages. It mistakenly sees the bilingual, in the words of Grosjean, as two monolinguals in one person, existing discretely side-by-side, whereas the reality is more complex.

What Grosjean terms the “monolingual fallacy” in modern linguistics is older than Chomsky. In fact, it took many years for the study of bilingualism to gain a “respectable position” within linguistics (Bialystok, *Bilingualism in Development* 20). From the early nineteenth century to about the nineteen sixties, the general thinking was that bilingualism has a harmful influence “on a human being’s intellectual and spiritual growth” and that bilingual people were “mentally confused and at a disadvantage in intelligence compared with monolinguals” (Li Wei 16).

Fabbro notes that the studies, some from as late as the nineteen nineties, carried out to determine whether bilingual subjects are as intelligent as monolinguals show prevalent misgivings towards bilinguals, misgivings dating from decades ago and current “particularly in some German academic circles” where it was believed that “bilingualism was responsible for a lower degree of intelligence” (106). Indeed, John Edwards observes that some of the most famous linguists have expressed reservations regarding bilingualism (Edwards 40). A well-known and oft cited example of such a linguist is Uriel Weinreich who in *Languages in Contact: Findings and Problems* (1953) enumerated the many problems that bilinguals face, among which “split national loyalties, marginalization, emotional difficulties, moral depravity, stuttering, left-handedness, excessive materialism, laziness, and detrimental consequences for intelligence” (quoted in Edwards 41).

Grosjean too mentions a number of studies that all found bilingualism to be a handicap, a negative influence on cognitive growth, intelligence and language development (*Life with Two Languages* 220-221). The linguist Otto Jespersen for example claimed, in 1922, that bilingual children would learn both languages imperfectly

and that the brain effort required to master two languages instead of one diminishes the child's power of learning other things, and this became a widespread conviction (quoted in Grosjean, *Life with Two Languages* 220).

Bialystok and Barac explain that the problem in these studies, especially the ones involving children, was that many aspects of bilingualism were not taken into account or clearly defined, such as “level of comprehension and production in the two languages, degree of bilingualism, when and where children had started to learn their other language(s), and how often it was used” (192). Moreover, many of these studies “paid little attention to the need to carefully match monolingual and bilingual groups, producing comparisons between children who differed in many ways including socio-economic status and their ability to understand English instructions, the language in which testing was usually conducted” (192). An intelligence test measuring the cognitive abilities of English monolingual and Welsh-English bilingual children for instance found that the bilingual children scored lower than the monolingual ones, “a performance interpreted as a sign of ‘mental confusion’ of the bilingual children. The English proficiency of the bilingual children was not considered” (192).

Similarly, Kenji Hakuta and Rafael Diaz point out that in early studies concerning the relation between bilingualism and intelligence it is hard to find out whether the subjects were indeed really bilingual, or perhaps just monolingual speakers of a minority language, because no effort was made to determine the *degree* of bilingualism of the participants. Some of these early studies assumed that bilingualism could “be estimated by the foreignness of the parents,” and in other studies “the sample's bilingualism was assessed through family names or even place of residence” (321).

This changed with a study by Elizabeth Peal and Wallace Lambert from 1962. Unlike their predecessors, Peal and Lambert assured their subjects were balanced bilinguals fluent in both their languages, and they controlled for the socioeconomic background of their samples. They tested French-English bilingual children in Montreal, all from the same school system, and found, contrary to what they were expecting, that the bilingual children outperformed the monolingual ones on “various measures of verbal and nonverbal intelligence, especially on tests requiring mental manipulation, concept formation, and symbolic flexibility” (Kroll and Hermans 15). With regard to their bilingual subjects they wrote: “Intellectually his experience with two language systems seems to have left him with a mental flexibility, a superiority in concept formation, a more diversified set of mental abilities” (Peal and Lambert (20)).<sup>29</sup>

However, although Peal and Lambert exercised unprecedentedly careful control over their sample selection, their study was not unbiased. Hakuta and Diaz note that they might have been biased towards the bilingual subjects: “Peal and Lambert’s bilingual sample included only children who scored above a certain determined level in the English Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, a test commonly used to measure intelligence in monolinguals” (322), and, furthermore, “the bilingual sample, on the average, belonged to a higher grade than the monolingual sample; perhaps the superiority observed in bilinguals was the result of their having longer exposure to formal education” (323).

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<sup>29</sup> Peal and Lambert’s study was the first psycholinguistic group study to find that bilingualism fosters cognitive development, but in fact there had been a number of individual case studies that found the same thing. The most famous one is that of Werner Leopold, who kept a diary of the linguistic development of his bilingual daughter Hildegard. Leopold’s observations led him to conclude that bilingualism encouraged an early separation of the word and its referent, he detected: “a noticeable looseness of the link between the phonetic word and its meaning” (358). Leopold also suggested a relation between the cognitive and semantic development of bilingual children, in the sense that the separation of meaning from sound leads to an early awareness of the “conventionality of words and the arbitrariness of language. This awareness could promote, in turn, more abstract levels of thinking” (Hakuta and Diaz 324).

Thus, “the cognitive advantages observed in Peal and Lambert’s balanced bilingual sample could have been inflated by several artifacts in their subject selection procedures” (323). Peal and Lambert admitted as much themselves. Describing their study they acknowledged that their results might lie in their method of choosing the bilingual subjects:

Those suffering from a language handicap may unintentionally have been eliminated. We attempted to select bilinguals who were balanced, that is, equally fluent in both languages. However, when the balance measures did not give a clear indication of whether or not a given child was bilingual, more weight was attached to his score on the English vocabulary tests. Thus some bilinguals who might be balanced, but whose vocabulary in English and French might be small, would be omitted from our sample. The less intelligent bilinguals, those who have not acquired as large an English vocabulary, would not be considered bilingual enough for our study (15).

This is in fact a problem with a lot of the post-1960s studies of bilingualism and intelligence, as Hakuta and Diaz point out: “In none of the studies reviewed have we seen evidence of attempts by the researchers to keep the identity of the subject blind to the experimenter. If the experimenter is keen on the hypothesis of the study and in addition knows whether the subject is a bilingual or a monolingual child, one cannot rule out unintended experimenter bias effects” (330). Similarly, a number of researchers pointed out that the cognitive advantages seen to be fostered by bilingualism do not hold for *all* bilingual subjects. A distinction needs to be made between what linguists call “additive” and “subtractive” bilingualism, a distinction related to that “between elite versus folk bilingualism” (Hakuta and Diaz 341).

In an additive form of bilingualism, Lambert and Taylor have written, people can add one or more foreign languages to their repertoire, “with no fear of ethnic/linguistic erosion,” and “profit immensely from the experience, cognitively, socially, and even

economically” (quoted in (Hakuta and Diaz 341). In a subtractive condition, conversely, the second language slowly replaces the first. Hakuta and Diaz quote Lambert and Taylor once more: “the hyphenated American child, like the French-Canadian child, embarks on a ‘subtractive’ bilingual route as soon as he/she enters a school where a high prestige, socially powerful, dominant language like English is introduced as the exclusive language of instruction” (ibid).

However, the research of Hakuta and Diaz themselves, which accounted for the bias affect, and more recent research undertaken with noninvasive brain imaging studies indicates that at least for elite or additive bilingualism, it can be said that bilingualism fosters cognitive development in a number of ways, as we shall see further on. Thus, in spite of its own methodological problems, the Peal and Lambert study had an important influence on subsequent linguists. Bilingualism was no longer seen as a handicap, an impediment to intelligence and cognitive growth, and sample groups were henceforth controlled more carefully.

The finding that bilingualism brings not just linguistic but also cognitive advantages is now the widespread conviction in the bilingualism research. Yet for our purposes it will be more interesting to look at bilingualism in terms of what *differences* it generates, in cognition and in linguistic behavior, than to determine whether these differences constitute advantages or not.

### **The “Tip-of-the-Tongue-Phenomenon”**

Recent research of bilingualism shows that the two (or more) languages of a multilingual are rarely equally developed. Bilingual people tend to use their different languages “for

different purposes, in different domains of life, to accomplish different things. Their level of fluency in a language depends on their need for that language” (Grosjean, “Bilingualism” 7).<sup>30</sup> Connected to this is the finding by neuro- and psycholinguists that, compared to monolinguals, bilinguals tend to be slower at naming pictures and objects. In the Boston Naming Task, an experiment that tests participants’ productive vocabulary by asking subjects to name pictures of objects and animals presented in grade of difficulty and order of word frequency, bilinguals did less well than monolinguals in both their languages.<sup>31</sup> Bilinguals also score lower on fluency tasks, and are subjected more often than monolinguals to the “tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon” (Kutas et al. 290).

This last finding is especially interesting for our purposes. The “tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon” is a “dramatic type of retrieval failure,” during which speakers fail to retrieve a word or name that they are sure they know (Michael and Gollan 393-394). One explanation for this is that bilinguals experience interference between “competing lexical representations across languages,” that is, words from different languages are competing for selection (id. 395-396). Another explanation, which is more widely supported by neuro- and psycholinguists is the “weaker link hypothesis” (id. 397), according to which bilinguals use words belonging to either language less often than monolinguals. Links in the lexical system are sensitive to frequency and “recency” of use; since in the bilingual language system links particularly to each language are used less often, these links are, thus, weaker (ibid).<sup>32</sup> Annette de Groot explains: “having two words for one and the same

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Also Grosjean, *Life with Two Languages* 231, and Edwards 45.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. for instance Anatoliy V. Kharkhurin 21.

<sup>32</sup> Michael and Gollan speculate that, if the weaker link hypothesis is correct, “bilinguals who speak twice as much as monolinguals should not be different from monolinguals on language-processing tasks,” but to my knowledge nobody has tried to test this yet.



concept and using both implies that bilinguals use each single word less often than monolinguals do. As a consequence, it has been less well learned” (389).

This has obvious interest for understanding bilingual writers. In *Alien Tongues*, Beaujour observes that bilingual writers often comment on the pains that their bilingualism causes them:

when they speak or write about their bilingualism, it is usually to complain. They frequently sound as though Macdonald Critchley and Uriel Weinreich were correct in maintaining that bilingualism hinders literary creativity, despite the existence, quantity, and quality of their own bilingual writing which itself disproves this contention. We are therefore faced with a paradox: bilingual writers whose work is conclusive evidence that bilingualism is not merely ‘additive’ but even ‘multiplicative’ at times *feel* as though their bilingualism were unnatural and negative – a curse or a dread disease (29).

This becomes less of a paradox when we are aware of the linguistic drawbacks, such as increased tip of the tongue instances, that bilingualism can cause. Clearly, these might present some difficulties when you are a bilingual writer, spending your days searching for “le mot juste.” In *Errata: An Examined Life*, George Steiner asked whether there are “disadvantages to being a traveler between languages” (quoted in Courtivron 2). The discoveries in neuro- and psycholinguistic research suggest that there are. I will discuss this in more depth in the following chapters, most notably in the chapter about Samuel Beckett.

## **Code-switching**

Another important way in which bilingual people differ from monolingual ones is that they tend to switch between their languages, sometimes but not always deliberately.<sup>33</sup> In linguistics, this is called “code-switching.” Code-switching is the seemingly arbitrary alternation of two (or more) languages within the same conversation, or even within a single sentence,<sup>34</sup> and it is something that “affects practically everyone who is in contact with more than one language or dialect” (Gardner Chloros 4). It is often considered sub-standard language use, “bad language” (Myers-Scotton 327), both by monolinguals, who tend to see it as a “grammarless mixture of two languages, a jargon or gibberish that is an insult to the monolingual’s own rule-governed language,” (Grosjean, *Life with Two Languages* 146) as well as by bilingual code-switchers themselves, who often claim to disapprove of it (Gardner Chloros 15), and see it as “done mostly out of laziness,” “embarrassing,” “dangerous,” or “not very pure” Grosjean, *Life with Two Languages* 146-147).<sup>35</sup>

This can be illustrated by a quote from the diary of Leo Tolstoy, who, like most upper class Russians at that time, was bilingual in Russian and French. In 1850, when he was twenty-two, Tolstoy wrote in his diary about his plans to improve his life; from now on, he would be less dreamy and more practical. To accomplish this, he devised a four-point plan of action, which included the following new “rule:” “Ne pas sauter dans une conversation du français au russe et du russe au français” (Troyat 82). Thus, like many

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. for instance Marta Kutas, Eva Moreno, Nicole Wicha 289.

<sup>34</sup> In fact, there are many different definitions – Penelope Gardner Chloros writes that code switching “can mean whatever we want it to mean” (11) and cautions readers to be aware that it is not “an entity which exists in the objective world but a construct linguists have developed to describe their data” (10) – but this is the most common one, as well as the most common-sense one.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. also Edwards 42.

bilingual speakers Tolstoy too considered his code-switching a vice of sorts, something to get rid off.

Linguists too considered code-switching a sign of linguistic incompetence. Weinreich called it “a deviation from the norms of either language” (quoted in Edwards 41), and Romaine, explaining that linguists regarded it “deviant, not ideal” because it challenges widely held ideas about linguistic behavior, quotes the work of Biggs, from 1972, who wrote “it is obviously impossible to scramble two languages so that they be thoroughly mixed [...] a speaker always knows which language he is speaking and can never claim he is speaking two languages at once or fusing two languages” (3).

The last thirty years or so linguists have come to realize it is neither deviant nor impossible but that, instead, code-switching is a normal consequence of being bilingual. One of the pioneering studies on the topic, executed by linguist Shana Poplack, showed that, in fact, the more fluent a bilingual is in both his languages, the more he will be inclined to switch between them. Poplack writes, “While fluent bilinguals tended to switch at various syntactic boundaries within the sentence, non-fluent bilinguals favoured switching between sentences, allowing them to participate in the code-switching mode, without fear of violating a grammatical rule of either of the languages involved” (581).

Thus, “code-switching, rather than representing debasement of linguistic skill, is actually a sensitive indicator of bilingual ability” (ibid). In other words, code switching is an accomplishment rather than a defect. Li Wei writes,

there is a widespread impression that bilingual speakers code-switch because they cannot express themselves adequately in one language. This may be true to some extent when a bilingual is momentarily lost for words in one of his or her languages. However, code-switching is an extremely common practice among bilinguals and takes many forms (13).

Moreover, Wei adds that it has “been demonstrated that code-switching involves skilled manipulation of overlapping sections of two (or more) grammars” (15).

It is, today, also a frequently studied topic by linguists, and this is in large part because of its semi-voluntary nature. As I mentioned above, code-switching is sometimes done intentionally, but not always. The sociolinguist John Edwards explains that bilingual speakers may often switch for emphasis, because they feel that the right word is found more readily in one of their languages than in another, or because of their perceptions of the speech situation, changes in content, the linguistic skills of their interlocutors, degrees of intimacy et cetera (41). These all imply conscious motives, intent.

Yet, as many linguists have pointed out, code-switching tends to increase when speakers are, for instance, tired, angry, or upset.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Gardner Chloros notes that bilinguals code-switch more often than they themselves realize, and thus that it is something that happens “below the full consciousness of those who use it” (15). This implies a degree of unintentionality, which is how, linguists say, code-switching can teach us something about the functioning of the bilingual brain.

Code-switching can show us something about the “mechanisms for keeping languages separate,” writes Gardner Chloros: “If languages in the bilingual brain were totally separate, neither translation nor code-switching would be possible; if they were totally integrated, then bilinguals would presumably code-switch randomly all the time and would not be able to speak monolingually” (120). Research into the ways a bilingual accesses words from his different languages has shown that bilingual speakers can never

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. for instance Grosjean, *Life with Two Languages* 278

entirely “turn off” one of their languages. Annette de Groot describes: “when bilinguals are conversing with their interlocutors in one of their languages the mental system that stores the other language is not completely at rest. A bilingual linguistic system is noisier than the language system of monolingual language users because, during both language comprehension and language production, linguistic elements of both linguistic subsystems are activated” (279).

### **Ping-Pong Balls, or: Activation and Inhibition**

Thus, when a bilingual is speaking in one of his languages, both languages are active – in linguistics this is called “language non-selective lexical access.” Research has shown, for instance, that when bilingual speakers of French and English use the word “coin,” both the English meaning “piece of money” and the French meaning “corner” are activated, independent of the language in which they are speaking at that moment (Cook 4).<sup>37</sup> This suggests, Kroll and Hermans note, “that the language system itself is fundamentally open, with interactions that reshape language use and carry domain-general cognitive consequences for the ability to resolve competing alternatives. Even proficient bilinguals appear to be unable to selectively switch off the language not in use when they hear, read or speak one language alone” (15).<sup>38</sup> It seems likely to assume that the same happens in the case of bilingual writing.

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<sup>37</sup> Cook is quoting a study by Beauvillain and Grainger here (1987). Cook also cites research by Hermans et al (2011) that shows that both phonological systems are activated when bilingual speakers produce cognates (Cook 4).

<sup>38</sup> In fact, something similar happens in monolingual word recognition. When a monolingual person reads, “many possible words initially become active on the presentation of a letter string, and the reader is usually not aware of them; only the word that is eventually recognized becomes available to awareness.” In the case of bilingual word recognition, this process is more complex because there are not just one but two (or more) languages involved (Dijkstra 179).

As a consequence, Kroll and Hermans sum up, learning and using a second language

is not a process that simply affects functioning in the L2 [second language] but changes the entire language system in a way that renders bilinguals different from their monolingual counterparts. There are effects of the L2 on the first language, competition between the two languages, convergence across the two languages, and positive consequences for cognitive performance” (16).

Because both of a bilingual’s languages are always active to some extent, bilingual speakers have to use mental resources to “control the relative level of activation of each language” (Michael and Gollan 390).

As a result, the notions of activation and, especially, suppression (or inhibition) are crucial in bilingual language processing. Gardner Chloros explains:

Activation is a complex psycholinguistic concept, which depends on such factors as the amount of contact with and use of a language, the level of proficiency, the method of instruction, age of acquisition etc. De Bot (2004) provides an image to explain activation and its opposite, inhibition, which he likens to [...] ‘holding down ping-pong balls in a bucket of water’ – where occasionally, however hard one tries, some will pop to the surface (129).

Franco Fabbro elucidates the neurological processes behind the “popping up” mechanism. Neurons are organized in circuits, within which information is continually exchanged (how this works we saw previously in footnote #9). “Each neuron,” Fabbro describes,

processes information, as it receives information from, and transmits information to, thousands of other neurons. Neurons coordinate the activity of the body organs and determine the behavior of the living organism. Some neuronal groups are organized into systems that are responsible for a specific function in order to reach particular objectives. Some of these functional systems and some specific functions are innate, or genetically preprogrammed, and thus need not be learnt (e.g. a baby’s crying), whereas other functions, such as language, are acquired (70).

Between different groups of neurons, circuits are built that can involve several parts of the nervous system. “Importantly,” Fabbro notes,

neurons and the neural circuits they form in the brain reduce the activation threshold, so that the more frequent the activation of a circuit, the lower the amount of energy needed for its re-activation. This is due to the fact that contact points responsible for information transmission between neurons are structurally and functionally modified according to their frequency of activation: the energy needed to activate a neural circuit is greater in the early phases and tends to diminish when the same circuit is activated repeatedly” (70).

Thus, the neural circuits that organize a specific function have activating and inhibitory mechanisms “whose complexity depends on the type of function they subserve” (71).

### **The Executive Control Function**

Because a bilingual’s two language are always active certain cognitive skills are honed in a bilingual brain. Having constantly to exert inhibitory control, suppressing or ignoring one language in order to be able to speak the other, they become better at what in neurolinguistics is called “control of selective attention” (de Groot 393), also known as the “executive control function,” the system responsible for attention selection, inhibition, shifting and flexibility that are “at the center of all higher thought” (Bialystok and Barac 193). Since about 2000, executive control has become an active area of research in neurolinguistics.

Ellen Bialystok was the first researcher to see a connection between bilingualism and the field of research that examines “how humans exert attention control while performing cognitively demanding tasks and, especially, tasks that represent some type of conflict” (de Groot 393). In an interview from 2011 with the *New York Times*, Bialystok describes that tests revealed that bilinguals “manifested a cognitive system with the

ability to attend to important information and ignore the less important” and explains very clearly how this works:<sup>39</sup>

There’s a system in your brain, the executive control system. It’s a general manager. Its job is to keep you focused on what is relevant, while ignoring distractions. It’s what makes it possible for you to hold two different things in your mind at one time and switch between them. If you have two languages and you use them regularly, the way the brain’s networks work is that every time you speak, both languages pop up and the executive control system has to sort through everything and attend to what’s relevant in the moment. Therefore the bilinguals use that system more, and it’s that regular use that makes that system more efficient (D2).<sup>40</sup>

In answer to a question of the *New York Times* journalist, Bialystok describes that it is largely as result of the development of new neuroimaging technologies that researchers have been able to make these discoveries. “It used to be that we could only see what parts of the brain lit up when our subjects performed different tasks. Now, with the new technologies, we can see how all the brain structures work in accord with each other” (D2). She adds:

In terms of monolinguals and bilinguals, the big thing that we have found is that the connections are different. So we have monolinguals solving a problem, and they use X systems, but when bilinguals solve the same problem, they use others. One of the things we’ve seen is that on certain kinds of even nonverbal tests, bilingual people are faster. Why? Well, when we look in their brains through neuroimaging, it appears like they’re using a different kind of a network that might include language centers to solve a completely nonverbal problem. Their whole brain appears to rewire because of bilingualism (D2).

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<sup>39</sup> A version of this interview appeared in print in the *New York Times* on May 31, 2011, on page D2 of the New York edition with the headline: “A Conversation With Ellen Bialystok.”

<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, prompted by the journalist, Bialystok explains that this means that bilinguals are also better at multitasking, because multitasking is one of the things that the executive control system manages: “We wondered, ‘Are bilinguals better at multitasking?’ So we put monolinguals and bilinguals into a driving simulator. Through headphones, we gave them extra tasks to do — as if they were driving and talking on cellphones. We then measured how much worse their driving got. Now, everybody’s driving got worse. But the bilinguals, their driving didn’t drop as much. Because adding on another task while trying to concentrate on a driving problem, that’s what bilingualism gives you” (D2).



This confirms what we saw before: a bilingual brain functions differently than a monolingual brain.

### **Metalinguistic Awareness**

An important aspect of this superior cognitive functioning in bilingual speakers is increased metalinguistic awareness, “the ability to reflect on and manipulate the structural features of language independent of meaning” (de Groot 320), or the conscious awareness of structural properties of one’s language, “the awareness of language itself, independent of the message it is conveying” (id 342). Bilingualism (and second language acquisition) promotes metalinguistic awareness because, write Bruck and Genesee, “bilingualism provides a form of contrastive linguistic instruction” which leads bilinguals “to compare and analyse the structural aspects of language in more advanced ways” (quoted in de Groot 390). (Bruck and Genesee are basing their ideas on tests performed with bilingual children, but research suggests that the same holds true for adults).

According to de Groot, bilingualism “boosts word awareness and, particularly, the awareness that a word’s form and its meaning are not inseparable entities but have become associated merely through convention” (390).<sup>41</sup> Consequently, bilinguals are aware “that the relation between a word’s sound and meaning is arbitrary, that a particular thing (or living being or abstract concept) remains this very same thing if its name were to be changed into a completely different one” (390). As a result, it is easier for bilinguals to “ignore the conventional meanings of words” (392). Thus, metalinguistic awareness allows one “to see through the meaning of language to its underlying structure” (Bialystok and Barac 195).

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<sup>41</sup> De Groot is basing herself here on two early studies by Ben-Zeev, 1977, Ianco-Worrall, 1972.

We will see how increased multilingual metalinguistic awareness can leave traces in literature in the following chapters, but here I would like to touch quickly on a new area of research that is interesting with regard to the study of multilingual fiction: the relation between multilingualism and creativity. A number of recent studies suggest that the cognitive advantages fostered by bilingualism promote creative thinking. Having two linguistic systems and two names for things provides bilinguals with the ability to see things from different points of view, and to switch between these different perspectives.

A recent study, *Multilingualism and Creativity* (2012), by Anatoliy Kharkurin, explores the impact of multilingualism on creative potential. Kharkurin shows that bilinguals outperform monolinguals on a number of creativity tasks, tests that, for instance, require subjects to come up with uncommon uses for common objects. This is, claims Kharkurin, because these kinds of tests require the same kind of suppression of irrelevant information that bilinguals use on a daily basis as they navigate their two (or more) language systems: “The inhibition of irrelevant information that is more efficient in individuals with great command of their languages seems to facilitate the extraction of an original solution and assist in focusing attention on the unconventional, atypical solutions to creative problems” (89). Similarly, Bialystok too finds that “creativity may indeed be an indirect beneficiary of bilingualism, at least in the way it is assessed on psychological tests” (Bialystok, “Consequences of Bilingualism for Cognitive Development” 428), and Li Wei writes that bilinguals are “able to extend the range of meanings, associations and images, and to think more flexibly and creatively” (21).

Of course, as Kharkurin admits, although bilingualism may indeed “encourage the use of certain cognitive processes in a more efficient way, which paves the way for more

sophisticated cognitive processing” other factors, such as intelligence, education, motivation and personal experience “may play a more dominant role” (66). All the same, it is an interesting find to keep in the back of our mind as we explore the works of three bilingual writers whose works show that they excelled at “divergent thinking” probably more than any other writer who came before them.

## Chapter Two

### Basically English:

### Joyce, Italian and the Creation of *Finnegans Wake*'s Multilingual Universe

this is nat language at any sinse of the world

(*FW* 83.12)<sup>42</sup>

Joyce's subversive use of English in *Ulysses* and, especially, *Finnegans Wake*, has predominantly been seen in light of his political ideas about Ireland's colonial history.<sup>43</sup> That Joyce's relation with the English language has a strong political dimension is undeniable, yet in this chapter I would like to suggest that it has an important linguistic component as well. The first part of the chapter will explore some of the linguistic aspects of Joyce's use of English and will reconsider the importance that Joyce's engagement with Italian had for his relation with English. This discussion is followed by a section comparing the more political dimensions of Joyce's language use with that of Franz Kafka, in order to throw a new light on the ways in which Joyce employs English

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<sup>42</sup> All references to *Finnegans Wake* will be cited parenthetically in the text as *FW*, followed by page and line number of the quotation.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. for instance Laurent Milesi, "Introduction: language(s) with a difference;" Milesi, "The Perversion of 'Aerse' and the Anglo-Irish Middle Voice in *Finnegans Wake*;" Declan Kiberd's "Introduction" to the 1992 Penguin edition of *Ulysses*; or, more recently, a doctoral dissertation by Salvatore Pappalardo, *The United States of Europe: Musil, Svevo, Joyce and the Literary Invention of a Postcolonial Community*.

and to show how an understanding of the linguistic aspect of Joyce's multilingualism helps to reevaluate the political element.

### **Talent in Second Language Learning**

James Joyce was what linguists call a “talented second language learner,”<sup>44</sup> someone with an “exceptional ability to achieve native-like competence in a second language after puberty” (Schneiderman and Desmarais 91).<sup>45</sup> He spoke, according to himself, “four or five languages fluently enough,”<sup>46</sup> and, as we shall see, at least two of these, Italian and French, he spoke with native-like fluency. He picked up new languages effortlessly. Modern Greek, for example, he learned to speak “not too badly” simply by spending “a great deal of time” with members of the Greek community in Trieste (*JLL I* 167),<sup>47</sup> and he was a good mimic of languages: the Czech Adolf Hoffmeister remembers Joyce speaking “in clear Czech and with a perfect accent,” something he accomplished by listening to his Czech brother in law (Hoffmeister 134).<sup>48</sup> We will look at Joyce's specific linguistic knowledge in more detail later in this chapter, but this short overview serves to demonstrate his superior language aptitude.

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. for instance Adriana Biedrón and Anna Szczepaniak, “The Cognitive Profile of a Talented Foreign Language Learner: A Case Study,” or Nicholas Abrahamsson, “Understanding talented second language speakers,” or Matthias Jilka et al, “Assessing Individual Talent in Second Language Production and Perception.”

<sup>45</sup> Of course, Beckett and Nabokov too were proficient in more than two languages. Beckett had a good command of Italian and German, and Nabokov was fluent in French – although recordings show he spoke it with less ease than English, and with a stronger accent. (Of Beckett's languages there are, unfortunately, no recordings.) Yet, as we shall see, Joyce surpasses both of them in his linguistic abilities.

<sup>46</sup> James Joyce, *Letters Vol. I* 167. Further references to the three volumes of Joyce's letters will be cited parenthetically in the text as *JLL I*, *JLL II*, and *JLL III*.

<sup>47</sup> In a later letter to Giorgio and Helen he plays on his modern Greek knowledge when describing the tenor John Sullivan's pending trip to Athens: “καλι ήμερα, κύριε! καλι ήμερα. κύρια! Τι κανετε? καλα, σας ευχαριστω!” (*JLL I* 380) (which means, the notes tell us, “Good day, sir! Good day, madam! How are you? Well, thank you!”)

<sup>48</sup> On an earlier occasion, Joyce had apologized to Hoffmeister for not speaking Czech, from which we can gather it is not a language he had seriously studied.

Hitherto very little research has addressed the phenomenon of linguistic talent and the possible cognitive factors that may underlie it, probably because such talent “is quite rare and it is virtually impossible to sort a sizeable group to conduct a factor analysis” (Biedron and Szczepaniak 53). Individual cognitive variables are large, and only about five percent of adult language learners are able to acquire native-like competence in all aspects that make up linguistic talent, including accent.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, pronunciation skills take up a separate position from other linguistic skills such as grammar or syntax, and recent research suggests that these are supported by a different neurological substrate. Matthias Jilka explains:

the neurological substrates of “grammar” and “accent” face different challenges in the acquisition of an L2 [second language]: while both must display neurocognitive flexibility in order to bypass the system established for L1, in the acquisition of pronunciation there is the additional need to bypass established motor pathways in order to control articulatory movements. This additional effort is claimed to account for both the greater difficulties in acquiring the phonetic aspects of language and the differences between children and adults (4).

It also explains why only such a small amount of adults manages to gain native-like fluency in a foreign language.

While, as we saw in the previous chapter, bilingualism can enhance neurocognitive flexibility, it seems that the opposite is also true: the talented second language learner possesses an innate neurocognitive flexibility that allows him to learn languages with more ease, and to capture a foreign accent perfectly. fMRI scans of talented and untalented language learners performing a number of pronunciation tasks showed that pronunciation “elicits a bilateral temporal network mainly restricted to superior temporal gyri and motor areas” and that the “extent of activation necessary to

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. for instance Schneiderman and Desmarais 91.

sustain the task was significantly greater for untalented speakers” (Jilka et al. 255-256). This suggests that “high proficiency correlates with reduced efforts in speech production, and enhanced cortical efficiency” (Jilka et al. 256). In other words, people with a talent for capturing accent have lower levels of brain activation in the parts of the brain that manage speech: their brains have to try less hard because they use “oxygen supplies efficiently” (Erard 232). People who are less good at reproducing accents use oxygen less efficiently and consequently have to work harder to produce speech (ibid).

Talented foreign language learners also seem to possess a specific brain anatomy compared to untalented learners. Biedron and Szczepaniak write that greater grey matter density was found in the inferior parietal cortex in talented learners, but add that this is a relatively unexplored phenomenon (54), and Ressel et al. note that two separate studies “(Golestani et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2008) have reported a positive correlation between the ability to perceive foreign speech sounds and the volume of Heschl’s gyrus (HG), the structure that houses the auditory cortex” (16597). (The auditory cortex is a brain area heavily involved in the perception and production of speech sounds.) “More precisely,” they add, “participants with larger left Heschl’s gyri learned consonantal or tonal contrasts faster than those with smaller HG” (ibid), suggesting as well that talented language learners have a different brain anatomy.

Those adults with a superior ability to perceive sounds have an auditory cortex that is “anatomically more complex” because it has more gyri, “made of white matter,” giving it more “surface area” (Erard 232). “Unlike other kinds of brain differences” writes Erard, “it isn’t likely that this one can arise through practice or training; at least no one has observed the human brain growing convolutions in this region after birth” (232-

233). This may explain why some people “find more pleasure in listening to foreign languages than others:” the brains of those who learn the sounds of a foreign language more quickly than others have “larger left Hersch’s gyri, due to more white matter” (Erard 233).

There are more factors that constitute talent in pronunciation. Researchers from the field of sociolinguistics have proposed that the “permeability of ego boundaries (i.e. the enhanced flexibility of psychological processes)” is important in acquiring a native-like accent (Jilka 4).<sup>50</sup> People with more fluid ego boundaries, “like children and people who have drunk some alcohol” are prepared to sound not like themselves and consequently will have better accents in a foreign language (Erard 238).<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, memory, especially “verbal working memory,” the “ability to recall verbal auditory input while simultaneously processing the input” and “phonological short-term memory, which is the ability to repeat novel verbal input immediately following its presentation” are important in language acquisition, and so is what linguists call an efficient “phonological loop” (Biedron et al. 57). The phonological loop is the part of working memory that serves as a “language acquisition device” and scholars have suggested that a talent for second language learning, including skill in capturing accents but also in learning vocabulary and grammar, might be the consequence of an “extremely efficient phonological loop” (ibid).

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. also Erard 238, Klosty Beaujour 18.

<sup>51</sup> In an article on “Cognitive aspects of pronunciation talent” Giuseppina Rota and Susanne Reiter tell the story of Pierre Fouché, a professor of phonetics at Sorbonne, who “allegedly told his students who could imitate a number of different pronunciations, that ‘a strong personality requires just one accent.’ He himself spoke lots of languages with a strong Catalan accent” (67).



A central skill in foreign language talent, connected to the notion of memory, is the concept of *noticing*. Noticing is defined as the “ability to pay attention to input, in particular to the formal properties of language,” it is dependent on memory and “linked to attention and awareness” (Biedron et al. 58). Erard describes the work of the linguist Madeline Ehrman, who studied accomplished language learners and noticed a combination of shared characteristics that she calls “synoptic sharpening” (Erard 215). The talented language learners Ehrman observed,

blend the best of the synoptic – flexibility and openness – with an attention style, known as sharpening, where close attention is paid to minute differences among sounds, words, and meaning [...] Synoptic sharpeners benefit from strategies that let them encounter language as it’s really used and, at the same time, notice linguistic details in those realms (Erard 215).

Thus, talented adult language learners possess a combination of cognitive abilities and personality traits that are contingent upon each other. They seem to have a natural metalinguistic awareness that is a consequence not only of certain cognitive traits, of a greater neuroplasticity and a different brain anatomy, but also of a particular psycholinguistic make up. Their metalinguistic awareness allows them to perceive and reproduce language in a superior way, which puts them in a unique position to learn foreign languages. And more foreign languages: De Groot describes that the more prior knowledge of a foreign language has been acquired, the easier it is to acquire still more, and the more languages are known, the more successfully metalinguistic knowledge is explored (100-101).

In the previous chapter we saw that bilingualism and second language acquisition advance metalinguistic awareness but research into linguistic talent reveals that the opposite is also true: metalinguistic awareness increases ability to learn languages. The

talented foreign language learner seems to possess an innate metalinguistic awareness, an instinctive sensitivity for language that facilitates language learning and this is a very interesting finding for Joyce.<sup>52</sup>

Many critics have commented on the importance of sound over meaning in the creation of the multilingual portmanteau language of *Finnegans Wake*, but Joyce's metalinguistic awareness and his high level of sensitivity to language are already apparent in much earlier works. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for example, we encounter a young Stephen pondering the fact that different words can refer to one and the same thing:

God was God's name just as his name was Stephen. *Dieu* was the French for God and that was God's name too; and when anyone prayed to God and said *Dieu* then God knew at once that it was a French person that was praying. But, though there were different names for God in all the different languages in the world and God understood what all the different people who prayed said in their different languages, still God remained always the same God and God's real name was God (16).

It makes Stephen "very tired" to think like this about the relation between a word's form and its meaning (16), but it is something that will continue to fascinate him – and his creator.

Similarly, in *Stephen Hero*, Stephen walks around Dublin on the lookout for language:

As he walked thus through the ways of the city he had his ears and eyes ever prompt to receive impressions. It was not only in Skeat that he found words for his treasure-house, he found them also at haphazard in the shops, on

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<sup>52</sup> There have been conducted a number of studies that suggest an important relationship between "musical aptitude and second language linguistic skills:" people with "advanced musical aptitude also had advanced foreign language pronunciation skills" (Milovanov and Tervaniemi 192). This is an interesting find for Joyce, who was a gifted musician as well as a talented foreign language learner. I might explore this further as I rework the dissertation into a book.

advertisements, in the mouths of the plodding public. He kept repeating them to himself till they lost all instantaneous meaning for him and became wonderful vocables (30).<sup>53</sup>

This type of repetition enables him almost to taste words, to perceive their thingness, and it shows that Stephen's, and Joyce's, interest in the sound of language, in pronunciation, in people's speech started early. We see this as well in the epiphanies, the short sketches Joyce wrote as a university student and gave a religious sobriquet. The epiphanies are not usually considered in discussions of Joyce's experimental use of language. They are poetic but linguistically conservative, and they do not contain much in the way of the radically experimental language play we find in *Finnegans Wake*. And yet, no matter how far removed the epiphanies seem from the extreme linguistics of the "pollylogue" (*FW* 470.9) that is *Finnegans Wake*, the basic ingredient that drives the later works is already present here: Joyce's meticulous attention to the peculiarities of people's speech. The epiphanies are Joyce's first attempt at experimentation with a literary rendering of spoken language and in this way serve as an important foundation for the later fiction.

### **Joyce's Linguistic Epiphanies: the Italian Connection**

Joyce wrote the epiphanies probably somewhere between 1900 and 1903. He never published them in their original form but as Morris Beja has shown ("Epiphany and the Epiphanies" 712-713), many were adapted into his later novels. Originally there seem to have been at least seventy-one epiphanies but only forty have survived. These can be divided into two groups: there are narrative epiphanies, which describe a dream, a mental

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<sup>53</sup> Stephen's vocables return in *Finnegans Wake*: "variously inflected, differently pronounced, otherwise spelled, changeably meaning vocable scriptsigns" where they create "more and less intermisunderstanding minds" (*FW* 118.25-28).

image, or a scene from Joyce's life, and there are dramatic or dialogue epiphanies, which record snippets of conversation.

Critical attention to the epiphanies has been scant, with critics favouring, as Vicki Mahaffey points out, "the concept of epiphany over the prose sketches that bear the same name" (179), and the little criticism that does exist tends to focus largely on the narrative epiphanies. This is surprising, as almost half of the epiphanies are of the dialogue kind – nineteen to be exact – and the epiphany that triggers Stephen Daedalus' definition of the form in *Stephen Hero* is a dialogue as well. The passage in question occurs towards the end of the novel. As Stephen wanders through Dublin "one misty evening,"<sup>54</sup> a "trivial incident" moves him:

A young lady was standing on the steps of one of those brown brick houses which seem the very incarnation of Irish paralysis. A young gentleman was leaning on the rusty railings of the area. Stephen as he passed on his quest heard the following fragment of colloquy out of which he received an impression keen enough to afflict his sensitiveness very severely.

The Young Lady — (drawling discreetly) ... *O, yes ... I was ... at the ... chapel...*

The Young Gentleman — (inaudible) ... *I ...* (again inaudibly) ... *I...*

The Young Lady — (softly) ... *O ... but you're ... very ... wicked ...*

This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself (211).

We do not know why this particular "fragment of colloquy" strikes Stephen so sharply that it inspires a spiritual manifestation. We are not given the actual gestures of these two characters, nor do we know what the "memorable phase of the mind" might be. All we know is that what makes such a strong impression on Stephen here is a seemingly

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<sup>54</sup> Through Eccles street, to be exact. Unbeknownst to Stephen here, this is, of course, the street that will house the future abode of the Blooms in *Ulysses*.

insignificant snippet of speech: it is language, a linguistic moment that inspires his definition of epiphany.<sup>55</sup>

With regard to the dialogue epiphanies, the part of Stephen's definition that is most important is the construction "vulgarity of speech or of gesture." There are, however, hardly any descriptions of gestures to be found in the epiphanies, and so it seems to be really all about the "vulgarity of speech." The word "vulgarity" here is usually explained as referring to Stephen's – and Joyce's – desire to set himself apart from others, to his view of a heroic artistic mind in a "crass environment" (Scholes and Kain 4). In their "introductory note" to the first published version of the epiphanies in *The Workshop of Daedalus*, Robert Scholes and Richard Kain wrote: "The distinction between two kinds of Epiphany clearly reflects Joyce's early vision of himself in the world, and his counterpart Stephen in his world: the mind of the artist is 'memorable,' his companions are 'vulgar'" (4). More recently, John Hobbs defines the meaning of the term "vulgar" with regard to the epiphanies by tracing its use throughout Joyce's fiction, and concludes that "the meanings of 'vulgar' range from unsophisticated and uneducated to common or crude" (3).

Vulgar here may also have a different meaning, especially considering the fact that the dialogue epiphanies are not particularly vulgar, in Hobbs' sense of the word, either in language or content. The only one that might be considered slightly vulgar is epiphany number thirty-five. Recorded by Joyce in London, it is the description one Eva Leslie gives of her brother and it goes like this: "Eva Leslie – Yes, Maudie Leslie's my

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<sup>55</sup> The Joycean epiphany is reminiscent of similar instances of revelation in Proust, most famously the suggestive force of the taste of a madeleine dipped in linden tea in his *Du côté de chez Swann*. Where in Proust enlightenment occurs through taste, through tea and cakes, as it were, in Joyce it is inspired by language, even though the language in this instance appears to be nothing more than shallow everyday chatter. Cf. also David Hayman 636-637.

sister an' Fred Leslie's my brother – yev 'eard of Fred Leslie? ... (*musings*) ... O, 'e's a whoite-arsed bugger ... 'E's away at present" (*Poems and Shorter Writing* 195). Yet here one gets the impression that it is recorded more from a sense of amusement at, or interest in, cockney humour than from shock at the vulgarity of this cockney girl's language.

Let me cite two short examples of dialogue epiphanies to give an impression of their style. This first one, number eleven, was documented by Joyce at the Sheehy's on Belvedere Place in Dublin:

Joyce – I knew you meant him. But you're wrong about his age.  
 Maggie Sheehy – (*leans forward to speak seriously*). Why, how old is he?  
 Joyce – Seventy-two.  
 Maggie Sheehy – Is he? (*Poems* 171).<sup>56</sup>

And this one Joyce noted down at the National Library, also in Dublin:

Skeffington – I was sorry to hear of the death of your brother....sorry we didn't know in time.....to have been at the funeral.....  
 Joyce – O, he was very young....a boy....  
 Skeffington – Still.....it hurts.... (*Poems* 182).

There is nothing remotely vulgar about these two scraps of dialogue, nothing particularly "crude" or "uneducated." They are in fact remarkable for their unremarkableness. If anything, they are examples of common speech, of speech that is maybe a bit stilted and clichéd. Reflecting the "houses which seem the very incarnation of Irish paralysis" in the passage that contains Stephen's definition of the epiphany, they show a language that may be considered somewhat paralyzed, unimaginative and banal, but hardly vulgar.

This is why I wonder whether Joyce's "vulgar" may not be a reference to Dante, the father of the Italian "vulgare illustre," the "illustrious vernacular." More specifically,

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<sup>56</sup> Joyce used this epiphany again in *Stephen Hero*, which is how we know it is a discussion concerning the age of Ibsen, Joyce's favorite playwright (*Stephen Hero* 46).

it recalls Dante's treatise "De Vulgari Eloquentia," "On Eloquence in the Vernacular," in which Dante "envision[s] the vitality of the vernacular" as the foundation of the politics, law and poetry of Italy (Jacoff 9).

Joyce's love for and knowledge of Dante is well-known. He started studying Dante while a university student and had a life-long interest in his works. In his seminal biography of Joyce Richard Ellmann writes that Dante was Joyce's favourite author, and Joyce himself told his students in Trieste that "Italian literature begins with Dante and finishes with Dante... I love Dante almost as much as the Bible" (Ellmann 226). According to Joyce, the *Divina Comedia* is "Europe's Epic" and it is therefore no surprise that Dante is an enormous presence in all Joyce's work (Ellmann 107). To quote Mary Reynolds: "Joyce was probably engaged with Dante more broadly and deeply than he was with any other author except Shakespeare and Homer" (3). Consequently, there are allusions to Dante in nearly all of Joyce's works.<sup>57</sup> The Joyce manuscripts acquired by the National Library of Ireland in 2002 and recently made available online reinforce the importance of Dante for Joyce: the very first set of documents contains early notes by Joyce on the *Divina Comedia*. When you open the section, the first thing you see is the word "Dante" scrawled by Joyce across the page in big blue crayon letters.

Most of the criticism on Joyce's relation to Dante focuses on the *Divina Comedia*, but in fact, Samuel Beckett, one of the earliest commentators on Dante's influence on Joyce, already draws our attention to the importance of the "De Vulgari Eloquentia" for *Finnegans Wake* in his essay "Dante...Bruno. Vico...Joyce." As most of the papers in

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<sup>57</sup> Mary Reynolds shows how references to Dante increase in frequency over the course of Joyce's writing career and explode in *Finnegans Wake*, where there are numerous references to Seudodanto (*FW* 47.19), to undante umoroso (*FW* 269.L1), to dauntly (*FW* 539.5) (in a frequency that in full reads "dauntly, gouty, and shopkeeper", leaving no doubt that it's the Italian poet being referred to), and to "the divine comic denti alligator" (*FW* 440.6).

*Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, the collection in which Beckett's essay first appeared, Beckett's essay was guided by Joyce,<sup>58</sup> and draws our attention to what Beckett calls "this attractive parallel between Dante and Mr. Joyce in the question of language" (30). Reynolds writes, echoing Beckett, that it seems clear that Joyce had read the "*De Vulgari Eloquentia*" "and saw himself as Dante's disciple particularly in the area of linguistic innovation" (202).

Dante's treatise, written in Latin, probably originated as a course of lectures written between 1302 and 1305.<sup>59</sup> Here, Dante advocates the use of an Italian "illustrious vernacular," made up of the best elements of all the different Italian dialects, instead of Latin for the writing of serious literature. Dante argues that vernacular languages are more noble than Latin, because where Latin is spoken fluently only by few, "since knowledge of its rules and theory can only be developed through dedication to a lengthy course of study" (15), the "vernacular language is that which we learn without any formal instruction" and without any rules (*ibid*). The vernacular is the living language of the people. The vernacular is also subject to change in a way that Latin is not. Latin, writes Dante, "is nothing less than a certain immutable identity of language in different times and places. Its rules having been formulated with the common consent of many peoples, it can be subject to no individual will; and, as a result, it cannot change" (25). The vernacular, on the other hand, "changes [...] with the passing of time" (*ibid*).

Dante sets out to "hunt for the most respectable and illustrious vernacular that exists in Italy" (27). In order to find the most beautiful Italian dialect, he first needs to

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<sup>58</sup> As Joyce admitted to Larbaud, "he had stood behind 'those twelve marshals more or less directing them what lines of research to follow'" (Ellmann 626).

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Barbara Reynolds, *Dante the Poet, the Political Thinker, the Man*. It was translated into Italian by Trissino in 1529 and only published in Latin, in Paris, in 1577 (Hollander 55).



determine the dialects that are not worthy of the name, these he will “root up and throw aside.” And so, he spends several pages enumerating the flaws of various Italian dialects. Moving from region to region, Dante ridicules every vernacular he encounters. About the Romans, for instance, he writes, “what the Romans speak is not so much a vernacular as a vile jargon, the ugliest of all the languages spoken in Italy; and this should come as no surprise, for they also stand out among all Italians for the ugliness of their manners and their outward appearance. They say things like ‘Messer, quinto dici? [Sir, what do you say?]}’” (27).

The Tuscans fare no better. They, “rendered senseless by some aberration of their own, seem to lay claim to the honour of possessing the illustrious vernacular,” and Dante feels called upon to “burst the bubble of their pride. When the Florentines speak, they say things like: ‘Manichiamo, introcque che noi non facciamo altro’ [Let’s eat, since we have nothing else to do.]” The Sienese say: “Onche renegata avesse io Siena. Ch’ee chesto? [If only I’d left Siena for good! What’s up now?]}” et cetera (30). This catalogue of the flaws of the various Italian dialects goes on for pages and makes for wonderful reading. With obvious delight and a linguistic precision that would befit a linguistic anthropologist, Dante records the different peculiarities of the various Italian dialects.

The attraction this must have had for Joyce is obvious. Dante’s focus on the vernacular as a living, changing language coincides with Joyce’s own interest in language as an organic thing. While Dante refused Latin as his language of composition, Joyce rejected both “the imposed rigours of an English tradition” (Milesi, “Introduction” 6), and the artificially restored Irish of the revivalists. Since English symbolized “the inflexible British rule” (Milesi, “Perversions” 113) and Irish was “forever on the point of dying

out” (Taaffe 92), both were fixed and unbendable in a way similar to Latin in Dante’s time. Joyce opposes them to what Laurent Milesi calls “the unruly, because uncoded, but living language of the people” (“Perversions” 113).

In his essay on *Finnegans Wake*, Beckett puts it like this: Dante and Joyce

both saw how worn out and threadbare was the conventional language of cunning literary artificers [...] If English is not yet so definitely a polite necessity as Latin was in the Middle Ages, at least one is justified in declaring its position in relation to other European languages is to a great extent that of medieval Latin to the Italian dialects (30).

Joyce shares with Dante a concern with renewing language.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, I do not think it is too far-fetched to see Joyce’s “vulgarity of speech” as an echo of Dante’s treatise, emphasizing Joyce’s interest in language as a living thing. The picture that arises from the “De Vulgari Eloquentia,” of Dante roaming around Italy and listening to people’s speech, is reminiscent of the account Joyce’s friend Oliver St. John Gogarty gives of the way in which Joyce recorded his epiphanies. In fact, Gogarty even refers to Joyce as “Dublin’s Dante.” He writes:

Dublin’s Dante had to find a way out of his own Inferno [...] James Augustine Joyce slipped politely from the snug with an ‘Excuse me!’  
 ‘Whist! He’s gone to put it all down!’  
 ‘Put what down?’  
 ‘Put *us* down. A chiel’s among us takin’ notes. And, faith, he’ll print it’ (Scholes and Kain 7).

“Which of us” Gogarty wonders, “had endowed him with an ‘Epiphany’ and sent him to the lavatory to take it down?” (ibid). Where Dante travelled the cities of Italy noting down their linguistic aberrations, Joyce roamed the streets, parlours and bars of Dublin,

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<sup>60</sup> Or, to use Beckett’s term for Joyce’s language use, with “desophisticating” language.

attentive to the language of its inhabitants and noting it down in the privacy of the lavatory.

Joyce pays the same exact attention to language as Dante, recording with a linguist's precision not just the words of the epiphanies, but "the tones, pace, audibility, and even the pauses in the conversation" (Hobbs 5). Or, in linguistic terms, he *notices*. We see this clearly in the last epiphany, which comes with a number of Joyce's own corrections. Here, we encounter Gogarty placing an order in a pharmacy. He tells the shop assistant to send the order to his home, then asks whether the assistant knows the address, to which the assistant answers with "yes." This "yes" is then crossed out by Joyce and replaced with a more extended "ye-es," thus capturing more precisely the exact intonation of the assistant's speech (*Poems* 200).

In the dialogue epiphanies, Joyce pays minute attention to how people speak, reproducing accent and pronunciation in a way that is remarkably similar to what he does in his later fiction, most notably in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, in which the "idiosyncratic rhythms of Dubliners' speech" take up a central position (Milesi, "Introduction" 5).

Thus, the linguistic conventionality of the epiphanies might at first glance seem a far cry from the experimentalism of *Finnegans Wake*, but in fact the basis for his later explorations with language is already there. In his introduction to the Italian translation of *Finnegans Wake*, Giorgio Melchiori summarizes it like this:

Che cos'altro è il linguaggio dell'ultima opera di Joyce se non l'epifanizzazione del noto, del familiare, del banale nel nostro linguaggio, mediante la sua proiezione in un metalinguaggio che ne intensifica fino al limite estremo i contenuti semantici, così che la banalità diviene memorabile? *Finnegans Wake* è un'unica, gigantesca epifania: l'epifania del linguaggio umano. (What else is the language of Joyce's last work if not the epiphanisation of the known, the familiar,

the banal in our language, through its projection into a metalanguage that intensifies its semantic contents to an extreme limit, in such a way that banality becomes memorable? *Finnegans Wake* is a single, gigantic epiphany: the epiphany of the human language) (Melchiori, "Introduzione").<sup>61</sup>

### Joyce's Linguistic Letters

The sensitivity for, pleasure in and awareness of language that we see in the epiphanies are displayed as well in Joyce's letters, where he displays a constant attention to speech and pronunciation. His letters, especially those to his brother Stanislaus, or "Stannie," are full of observations on the accents and idiom of his family members and of people he encounters. About Nora he wrote to Stanislaus, for instance: "Just now she came in and said 'The landlady has her hen laying out there. O, *he*'s after laying a lovely egg" (*Selected Letters* 58), taking evident pleasure both in her grammatical deviations and her Irish syntax. On another occasion he observed, also to Stanislaus: "Nora says 'Divil up I'll get till you come back.' Naif sequence!" (Ellmann 198).

Similarly, it is with obvious delight that he reproduced the London pronunciation of some young men he meets while visiting the Colosseum in Rome:

While we were in the middle of it, looking at it all round gravely from a-sense of duty, I heard a voice from London on one of the lowest gallery [sic] say:

-The Colisseum-

Almost at once two young men in serge suits and straw hats appeared in an embrasure. They leaned on the parapet and then a second voice from the same city clove the calm evening, saying:

– Whowail stands the Colisseum Rawhm shall stand

When falls the Colisseum Rawhm sh'll fall

And when Rawhm falls the world sh'll fall –

but adding cheerfully:

– Kemlong, 'ere's the way aht – (*Selected Letters* 92).<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> My translation. Cf. also Boldrini 138.

<sup>62</sup> This recurs in somewhat different form in a later letter to Giorgio and Helen, the same one we saw in a previous note, in which Joyce described the tenor John Sullivan's trip to Athens: "While stands the Comeandseum Greece shall stand!" (*JLL I* 380).

On another occasion he described the English sounding Italian of a minister he came across:

Last night I went into an evangelical hall. The minister was English. Is it affectation or impotence of the English that they can make no attempt to pronounce any language but their own. He spoke fluently and correctly enough but it had no resemblance to Italian in sound. I can easily distinguish the English accent, talking Italian. Candidly, I don't know whether they assume it or not. Their accent speaking English (particularly that of the women) is very pleasant and modulated compared with the Irish or American accent or the Scotch accent. The American accent is really bloody fearful to listen to. By the way, one of the little illusions which gladden the heart of the staff of *Sinn Fein* is that the English don't know how to pronounce their own language. When an English tourist meets *Che Buono* the latter sneers at him because he says 'Haw, I cawn't heawh wot youah saying', but he forgets his compatriot, who in Dick Sheehy's story, after ranging the hotel burst in on the dinner-table, holding up his trousers and asked earnestly 'For the love o' Jaysus, gintlemin, will ye tell us where's the convaynience' (*Selected Letters* 128-129).

Joyce's attention for speech and pronunciation, always keen, becomes even more so with his son Giorgio's first attempts at speaking Italian – the language in which Joyce raised his children. In August 1906, when Giorgio was just over a year old, Joyce wrote to Stanislaus, with obvious delight:

Georgie is a great favourite with everyone here. All the people we frequent know his name. He has added to his vocabulary 'O Gesù Mio' 'Brutto, brutto, brutto' [...] In one restaurant we go to, Georgie sits sedately at the top of the table in a little high chair of his own and announces to the restaurant the arrival of each of our dishes by shouting 'Ettero, Ettero'. When we were in S. Peter's he began to shout 'Iga, Iga' immediately when the lazy whores of priests began to chant" (*Selected Letters* 98).

"Ettero" is probably baby talk for "eccolo," or "here it is", and "Iga" might be a bastardized "Viva," as the notes suggest. A few months later, Joyce writes:

Georgie is very well and fat. He spends his day pulling about papers clothes and shoes. He is cursed frequently by both his parents for mislaying the comb and the sponge or the towel or my hat or shoes: and when asked where it is he points to the ceiling or the window and says 'la!' [...] His latest phrases are 'Bua!

(brucia!)’ ‘Lalia! (Giornale d’Italia)’ ‘Abace! (In braccia)’ and ‘Ata! (In terra).’ The two last he alternates very frequently. He also says ‘Appetito!’ and ‘Addio!’ (*Selected Letters* 126)

Similarly, a few years later Joyce writes to his sister Margaret, on the eve of a visit to Dublin, how excited Giorgio is about the trip to “Dubirino” (Ellmann 279).

The examples in these letters, and in fact there are many more, illustrate Joyce’s meticulous attention to speech and pronunciation, but also suggest a connection to *Finnegans Wake*, inasmuch as Giorgio’s prattle constitutes an interesting semblance to what will later become the language of the *Wake*. Giorgio’s corruptions of Italian, especially, are remarkably similar to the bastardizations of language we find in the *Wake*. And they elicit a similar type of interpretive speculation from critics. Giorgio’s “Iga, Iga” for instance, is explained by Ellmann in his notes as “Possibly ‘Viva, viva,’” a reading that would be reinforced by the fact that they are in a church (*Selected Letters* 98). Melchiori on the other hand understands it as a reference to a Triestine obscenity, a reading that would be reinforced by the “lazy whores of priests” that follows it.

Either might be right, or better: both might be right, and this is precisely how Giorgio’s chatter relates to the *Wake*, where most words mean at least “two thinks at a time” (*FW* 583.07). To give just one random yet representative example: in the sentence, “The grandest bethehailey seen or heard on earth’s conspectrum since Scape the Goat, that gafr, ate the Suenders bible” (*FW* 329.35-330.01), the word “gafr” could refer to the Welsh “gafi” or “goat,” a reading which would be supported by the preceding “Scape the Goat,” a reference to “Skin the Goat,” the alias of James Fitzharris, one of the Invincibles, a 19th century group of militant Irish radicals intent on assassinating key members of the British government in Ireland who appears in *Ulysses*. It could also refer

to the Arab “qafir,” or “infidel,” supported by the following “Sünder,” German for “sinner.” It might also refer to “gaffer,” perhaps not supported by anything but still there.

Many years later Nora’s struggles with French were noted down by Joyce with the same pleasure and attention, and these too show a resemblance to the language of *Finnegans Wake*. In 1905 Joyce had already commented on Nora’s inability to learn French when he remarked, casually and between parenthesis, to Stanislaus “(I tried and failed to teach her French)” (*Selected Letters* 64), as an aside to her inability to learn Italian. Twenty years later, Joyce writes in a letter to Lucia in Italian: “Cara figliola: ‘Hariosement’ come dice mama la tua benedetta cura è terminata” (*JLL I* 383), using Nora’s corruption of the French “heureusement” as a way to amuse Lucia.

This is precisely the sort of thing Joyce does in *Finnegans Wake*. Here we read, for instance, “Figtreeyou” (*FW* 9.13) for “victorieux;” “pureede paumee” (*FW* 99.30) for “puree de pommes” or “applesauce;” and “Boscoor” for “bassecour,” “poultry yard,” (*FW* 414.6), or “Moy jay trouway la clee dang les champs. Hay sham nap poddy velour, come on!” (*FW* 478.19-22), which sounds like a drunken Englishman (or Nora) saying “Moi, j’ai trouvé la clef dans les champs. Et ça n’a pas de valeur, comment,” translating to something along the lines of, “Me, I have found the key in the fields. And that has no value, how!”

It is impossible to determine whether Nora’s “pigeon” French (to use Nabokov’s term)<sup>63</sup> or Giorgio’s baby Italian, or any of the other snippets of speech Joyce noticed around him provided actual inspiration for the language of the *Wake*, yet it does seem plausible that it is in part Joyce’s high level of sensitivity to sounds and phonology that

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<sup>63</sup> Who mentioned “my pigeon-English” to Wilson, *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 51.

the epiphanies and his letters display, his innate metalinguistic awareness that paved the way for the extreme treatment of language we encounter in *Finnegans Wake*.

### **Joyce's Languages**

We saw above that the ability to really *notice* language combined with the ability to effectively explore metalinguistic knowledge is one reason that talented language learners can acquire so many languages. Joyce did this so successfully that critics have been trying to fix the exact number of languages he spoke for decades. An early example is an essay by Alessandro Francini Bruni, Joyce's friend, colleague, and one-time flat mate in Pola and later Trieste. Here, Francini Bruni jealously wrote: "It is not true that James Joyce knew seventeen languages. He did not know even Irish, the language of his fathers. He spoke and wrote French and Italian, as well as English, with great skill but his knowledge of other languages was limited" (44).

This "Recollection of James Joyce" appeared in a collection of reminiscences of the writer by different contemporaries, and a footnote from Willard Pots, the editor of the volume, quickly adjusts Francini Bruni's slightly meager view of Joyce's linguistic skills: "Joyce was also fairly accomplished in Danish and German, took lessons in Flemish, Spanish and Russian, and knew various other languages, including Latin and modern Greek. He took some lessons in Gaelic as a young man but had limited knowledge of it" (44).

More recently, in 2010, Tim Conley wrote: "The myth of the omniglot Joyce is neither accurate nor useful, but determining precisely which languages Joyce 'knew' – the 'perverted commas' here are cautionary – and how well he 'knew' them is an ongoing



critical and biographical discussion” (311). Basing himself on the above mentioned letter, in which Joyce declared he spoke “four or five languages fluently enough” (*JLL I* 167), Conley joins the debate and speculates: “Joyce presumably refers to Latin, German and French (the legacy of his Jesuit education), as well as Norwegian (the language of the Master Builder, dutifully studied) and Italian (the chosen language of his family)” (312).

A comparative reading of Joyce’s letters, of Joyce biographies, and of memoirs by people who knew Joyce during his years on the continent, suggests that Conley’s conjectures are correct, although in fact it was not Norwegian Joyce studied but Danish. Many critics make this mistake.<sup>64</sup> Ibsen, though by nationality Norwegian, wrote in Danish, which at that time was the official language of Norway. So when Joyce studies the language of the “Master Builder,” it is Danish he studies, not Norwegian. Norwegian might be more pleasing to the ear than Danish, but it would not have gotten Joyce very far with Ibsen.

Joyce continued to study Danish throughout his life. He told the Danish journalist Ole Vindig in 1932, during his first and only visit to the country: “I have taken lessons everywhere I found Danes. Danish has been a passion for me” (Vindig 147). Even when Joyce and his family were living in Rome, and he was writing plaintive letters to his brother about the acute poverty of their circumstances, he still spent money on Danish lessons with a Dane named Pedersen he found there. Joyce was modest about his Danish skills. To Vindig he said, “I can make myself understandable when I speak slowly, but I can’t understand what others say” (147), and, “all I can speak is Ibsen’s language.” Yet

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. also O’Neill, p 4: Joyce “taught himself Norwegian in order to read Ibsen in the original,” *Polyglot Joyce*, or Melchiori, who in Joyce’s *Feast of Languages* writes that Joyce “learns Norwegian” in order to write to Ibsen, p. 20, or Thomas Faerber and Markus Luchsinger, *Joyce in Zürich*, who quote Budgen saying Joyce “turned his attention to Norwegian which he has studied to this day,” p. 178.

Vindig found Joyce spoke Danish fluently for a foreigner and he was competent enough to pun on the Danish for “to work” and “to order a glass of wine:” “at bestille noget” and “at bestille en flaske vin” (Ellmann 692).

Joyce learned German also through self-study. In fact, it was his interest in Ibsen that prompted him to learn German. Previously Joyce had “disliked and avoided” German (Ellmann, 76) (as he had German literature; Goethe, for instance, he considered “un noioso funzionario” (id. 389), an “annoying civil servant”). But as he became more interested in Ibsen’s plays, he decided he needed to learn German so that he could read the plays of Gerhart Hauptmann in the original, a playwright who had been heavily influenced by Ibsen. At age 19 he translated two Hauptmann plays into English, *Vor Sonnenaufgang* and the more recent *Michael Kramer*,<sup>65</sup> and he continued studying German by himself. In a letter to his brother, written from Trieste in 1905, Joyce explains he is extremely busy because he has, among other things “German to learn (I have learnt a good deal)” (Ellmann 192).

Joyce’s German, apparently, was good but never completely fluent. He was competent enough to make jokes in German: “wenn es ist furchtbar heiss, lesen die Jeiss!” or: “Ich bin der Fleisch der stets bejaht,” but not fluent enough to joke without making mistakes: it should be “das Fleisch” and either “lesen Sie” or “lese.” In *The Making of Ulysses*, Joyce’s friend from his years in Zürich, the English painter Frank Budgen, writes that Joyce was fluent in German (178), yet although he spoke it well, he was never as articulate in German as he was in Italian or French.

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<sup>65</sup> These, apparently, were very bad translations. Cf. Hans Walter Gabler, “James Joyce Interpreter.” Gabler quotes Yeats, who was of the same opinion. On returning Joyce’s translations he told him: “You know of course that you are not a very good German scholar.” *Genetic Joyce Studies*, Issue 4 (Spring 2004) [http://www.antwerpjamesjoycecenter.com/GJS4/GJS4%20Gabler.htm#\\_ftnref2](http://www.antwerpjamesjoycecenter.com/GJS4/GJS4%20Gabler.htm#_ftnref2)

This becomes clear from one of the letters he wrote to Martha Fleischman, his young neighbor and love-interest in Zürich, in December 1918. He starts the letter in simple, almost clumsy German, and makes a number of mistakes (he writes “von fremde Leute” instead of “von fremden Leuten,” “Jedes Abend” instead of “Jeden Abend,” “mit der Name” instead of “mit dem Namen,” “ich wurde” instead of “ich würde” et cetera), then switches from German to French and explains: “Je continue en français parce que l’allemand ne me va pas” (*Selected Letters* 236). The rest of the letter continues in a French that is much more sophisticated than the German and without grammatical mistakes. To quote Thomas Faeber and Markus Lucksinger: “Offenbar war ihm sein Deutsch nicht gut genug in einer solch wichtigen Angelegenheit” (73) (“Apparently he considered his German insufficient on such an important occasion”).

Joyce’s French, on the other hand, was completely fluent. He first studied it at school, both at Clongowes Wood College and later at Belvedere College, and continued his studies at University in Dublin, with the native French professor Édouard Cadic. But when Joyce arrived in Paris in 1902 to study medicine he discovered his French was not good enough to follow the complex lectures of what Stephen in “Proteus” calls the “Paysayenn. P. C. N., you know: *physiques, chimiques et naturelles*” (*U* 3.176-177).<sup>66</sup> His short stay in Paris improved his French considerably however, and when the Joyce’s moved to Paris in 1920, where they lived until 1940, his French was of near native fluency.

The many letters by Joyce in French that have been published show his ease with the language, and even letters in English are full of French interjections. To Harriet Shaw

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<sup>66</sup> All references to *Ulysses* in the following pages are identified by episode and line number – the figure 11.240, for instance, designating the 11<sup>th</sup> episode, line 240 – according to the Gabler edition of 1986 (see bibliography).

Weaver he writes, for instance: “One thing is sure, however. Je suis bien triste” (*JLL I* 371). Similarly, a letter in English to Giorgio and his wife Helen ends in French: “Là-dessus je me tais. C’est l’heure de la soupe magique” (*JLL I* 400), and another to Giorgio and Helen switches back and forth: “I warned your concierge not to rébuter a wire” (*JLL III* 311), or, again to Giorgio and Helen: “The stupid femme de menage [sic] has broken all my pens.” Et cetera – there are literally hundreds such examples, illustrating Joyce’s adroitness in French.

Joyce also studied Irish for a short time while still a student in Dublin but disliked the prejudice of his teacher, the famous Pearse, against the English language and quit his lessons. Then there are, of course, the many languages he explored, and sometimes studied as well, while working on *Finnegans Wake*, such as Russian, Albanian, Yiddish, Welsh, Hungarian and Dutch.

Among Joyce’s many different languages Italian takes up a singular position. Although initially a foreign language he studied at Belvedere College and at University in Dublin, like French, it became and remained something much more personal: the chosen language of his family. From an acquired tongue, “dutifully studied” like his other languages,<sup>67</sup> it grew to be his most intimate language, the language in which he spoke (and wrote) to his children.

### **“But *ci vuol poco!*” (*FW* 456.8): Italian and Joyce**

The fact that the Joyces adopted Italian among themselves and kept it as family language long after they left Trieste is common knowledge, but the importance of this has not

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<sup>67</sup> McCourt remarks that although Joyce was “gifted in languages” he also put in “hours of study” (77).

received much critical attention.<sup>68</sup> This is odd, as it seems to me a remarkable fact, one that must have significance for the works. It can hardly be otherwise: Here is a writer who, in spite of his complex relation to his native English chooses to write his fiction in English, yet who speaks exclusively in Italian with his family members and who consequently uses Italian when writing to his children, even twenty-six years after having left Italian speaking territory. The wealth of over seventy Italian letters from the recently surfaced Jahnke bequest in Zürich emphasize this further and shows that although Joyce might not have switched language “Conradically” in his fiction, in his family life and family letters he had.

Perhaps it is not too remarkable that the Joyces all spoke Italian in Trieste, as a way of integrating, and especially as a way of having their children integrate (although many immigrants would not have followed their example). But that they should keep it

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<sup>68</sup> It is interesting to note here that there are differing opinions on whether it was Italian or Triestino that the Joyce family employed *in casa*. Francini Bruni writes that it was Italian, and so does August Suter, who remembers that Joyce “used to speak Italian to his children” and that “his Italian was melodiously articulated and musical” (65). Frank Budgen too writes: “At the door of the flat one heard the clear shapes and metallic tones of the Italian language. Italian was the house language” (36). The Triestine Silvio Benco, conversely, writes that the Joyces “all speak our language, taking pleasure in preserving the harshness of the local accent” and remarks on the curious contradiction, later, between their luxurious Paris apartment and the speech of the Trieste slums that filled it (49). Similarly, Nino Frank recalls Nora addressing Joyce “in the lisping speech of those who dwelt in the shadow of San Giusto” (83). (San Giusto is the Cathedral of Trieste) It seems likely that in reality they used a mixture of both. Joyce’s essays and letters show, however, that he had no trouble keeping Italian and Triestino apart. Lobner points out that although Joyce appreciated the “humorous possibilities” of the dialect, he “never let it interfere with *regnicolo*, the peninsula’s formal Italian language” (Lobner 28). And indeed, whenever Triestino appears in the letters, it is clearly for comic effect, as in a letter Joyce wrote to Lucia in October 1935. Here, he retells her a funny story he heard from one of his pupils in Trieste. One of the sisters of this student was learning how to knit, but proved to have no particular talent for it and hence her teacher tells her to go home and ask an older sister how to do it: “L’indomani la ragazza arrivò a scuola ma il suo lavoro era peggiore che prima. Come? disse la maestra. Non hai una sorella maggiore a casa? Sì, siora maestra. E non ti ho detto di domandarle come si fa? Sì, siora maestra. Ed hai domandato? Sì, siora maestra. E cosa ti ha detto tua sorella? La ga dito che vadi in malora lei e la calza.” (The next day the girl came to school but the work was worse than before. How is this? said the teacher, don’t you have an older sister at home? Yes, Miss. And didn’t I tell you to ask her to show you? Yes, Miss. And what did your sister say? She said that you and the knitting should both go to hell”). This last sentence is in Triestino, which here is clearly meant to heighten the humor of the story (*JJLL III* 378).

up for the next three decades, while living in German speaking Zürich, Francophone Paris and, at the end of Joyce's life, again in Zürich, is extraordinary.

It was, moreover, not at all an obvious step. Nora knew no Italian whatsoever when the couple arrived in Pola in 1904, and Joyce soon discovered that his university Italian might have been sufficient for reading Dante in the original, but was less much suited for everyday use. Francini Bruni gives an elaborate account of Joyce's strange, archaic Italian, which he called a "crippled Italian full of ulcers", "an only child language" and a "dead language" (12): "He could quote Dante etc. from memory. But if he had to speak the language he got nowhere. His syntax was so garbled that he sounded like an escapee from the madhouse" (40).

However, Italian too Joyce studied dutifully. He had a notebook entitled "Italiano," full of exercises, vocabulary, idioms, and standard phrases,<sup>69</sup> and quickly picked up contemporary and more colloquial Italian. So much so that Francini Bruni comments on Joyce's later Italian: "English speakers in Italian will never be able to mask the hissing 's' typical of their language. But Joyce pronounced Italian in a way that would deceive others about his foreign origin," (44) illustrating Joyce's superior ability to perceive and reproduce foreign speech sounds.<sup>70</sup>

Nora too made some progress in the language, although this did not go very quickly: in July of 1905 Nora could "speak about thirty words of Triestine dialect" and could not do much by herself (*Selected Letters* 64) (this is around the time that Giorgio was born, which shows that it was not an obvious step for Nora to be raising her child in

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. McCourt 76.

<sup>70</sup> In spite of his excellent Italian, Joyce remained modest about his capabilities. When a student once asked him how long one must study a language to really master it, Joyce answered: "I've been studying Italian for 15 years and am at last beginning to know it" (Ellmann 472-473).

Italian, considering that she barely spoke the language). However, a year later Joyce was able to announce to his students that his wife had “learned enough Italian to enable her to run up debts comfortably” (Ellmann 216), and the collected letters show that she would sometimes cable Joyce in Italian. Yet as commentators have observed, after the Joyces took on Italian as the family language Nora was the only one who would still occasionally make use of English.<sup>71</sup>

All this suggests that adopting Italian as the family language must have been a gradual process, since upon arrival in Pola, and later Trieste, Joyce’s Italian was insufficient and that of Nora non-existent. Joyce himself gives a hint concerning the manner in which Italian took over. In a letter to his daughter-in-law Helen, the wife of his son Giorgio, Joyce once wrote, apparently in answer to a complaint from her:

Allegretto, dear complementary but most suspicious daughter in law. The reason I write in Italian to Giorgio is not to conceal anything from your keen swift flashing and infallible eye but because when he was introduced to me 30 years ago by Dr. Gilberto Sinigaglia I said: Toh! Giorgio! To which he replied: Baa Boo. Our conversation has continued in that tongue (*JLL I* 380).<sup>72</sup>

This suggests that Joyce spoke to his children in Italian from the moment they were born, something already inaugurated by his giving them Italian names. Francini Bruni has written that although guests to the Joyce household “selected their own language for conversation,” there were two things which were never allowed to be translated: “the children’s names. They were always Lucia and Giorgio” (45).<sup>73</sup> They were always Lucia and Giorgio, and Joyce always addressed them in Italian. In fact, this seems to have been almost a matter of pride with him. In a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, from 1934 (so

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. for instance Nino Frank 89.

<sup>72</sup> Baa Boo sounds like a distorted version of “Babbo,” Italian for “dad.”

<sup>73</sup> Although in fact, when a little boy, Giorgio would sometimes be called “Giorgie.”

nineteen years after the Joyces left Trieste) he describes a conversation he had with Lucia and adds: “of course it was in Italian” (*JJLLL I* 353).

Joyce’s letters show how persistently he kept this up throughout his life. They show as well that he tried writing in Italian with Stanislaus too. There are a few letters in Italian to “Caro Stannie” from 1919,<sup>74</sup> and a telegram (455, 16 October 1919) but after these the letters revert back to English.<sup>75</sup> It seems that “Stannie” replied in English (*JJLL II* 442 – this is the last letter from Stanislaus immediately preceding the 3 Italian ones to him from Joyce, the next letter from him is from 26 February 1922 (*JJLL III* 58), and is in English too), which might be why writing to him in Italian did not stick: Stanislaus did not cooperate. Perhaps he found this business of adopting a new family tongue nonsense, or perhaps his Italian was insufficient. It is hard to say, although it seems clear that Stanislaus’ Italian was never as good as that of his brother. John McCourt quotes a diary entrance in which Stanislaus writes: “I was not able to bargain about a pair of boots yesterday and I make a poor show when I speak all in Italian” (80). His Italian eventually improved but Ellmann notes that “his accent was never quite so impeccable as his brother’s” (215).

Joyce’s letters to Giorgio and Lucia are consistently in Italian, without exception. The letters to Giorgio and his wife Helen are most interesting in this respect. Here, he tends to address Helen in English and Giorgio in Italian, in one and the same letter, down to the opening, which will often run: “Caro figliolo and dear daughter-in-law,” or “Caro Giorgio and dear Helen,” and always signs himself off with “Babbo.” Sometimes he writes Helen and Giorgio together in English, and then adds a little aside in Italian to

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<sup>74</sup> There are three, to be exact: *JJLL II* 446 (31 July 1919), 448 (25 August 1919), 451 (8 September 1919).

<sup>75</sup> The next letter is from 12 July 1920, *JJLL III* 8, it is written in English.



Giorgio, or he writes Giorgio in Italian and adds a few lines in English for Helen. The following letter is a good example of this. It is written to Giorgio in Italian and at the end switches to English for Helen:

Qui nulla di nuova. Tutto bene. Spero che il mare faccia da palandromo con voi.  
Ma perbacco, che trenata di farabutti, mascalzoni, malandrini e brutti ceffi ieri  
mattina alla stazione! La piu' ributtante spettacolo ch'io abbia visto da qualche  
tempo.  
Ed ora termino. Di nuovo, me ne congratulo con te.  
Dear Helen, I hope you have had a good passage and good news on arrival.  
Ciao, nipotino.  
Ti abbraccio Babbo (*JLL III* 312).

Thus, Joyce keeps his languages completely and consistently separate in his letters. There is only one exception to this, a letter from the Jahnke bequest to Giorgio and Helen together from 1932 in which he switches back and forth between English and Italian within sentences and in an apparently random manner. Interestingly, the curators who transcribed the Jahnke letters twice comment on the code-switching in the letter, underlining how exceptional this is for Joyce.<sup>76</sup> It is a long letter (it takes up six pages) but it is worth quoting in full as it is the only example of this type of radical code-switching in Joyce's letters:

Caro figliolo and dear daughter-in-law: Vi ringrazio della lettera alquanto scortese in prompt reply to my telegram of a fortnight ago. Mi rallegro della buone notizie determin[??] di Stefanuccio and also of the other members of the colony. La condizione peggiorata del mio occhio destro (quello non operato da Vogt) is not due to excesses in connection with wine, woman and/or song, ma al fatto che ho pensato agli interessi altrui instead of thinking of myself first. Non sono tornato da Vogt ancora because I am awaiting a reply from Collinson (English physician consulted in London) about the glaucoma complication, cosa che mi sorprende molto perché non me ne sono mai accorto.  
Also I wish him to see me in a more rested state e devo anche fare i miei piani per ogni eventualità.

<sup>76</sup> The description of the letters mentions it is "partly in Italian and partly in English", and after the first switch from Italian to English a little aside reads: [>languages alternate within sentences].

As regards Lucia I cannot give any advice salvo che sua madre pensa la migliore cosa è di scriverlo ogni tanto in a natural and unexaggerated tone. Comunque sia è rimasta colà 15 giorni e forse resterà fino a 7tembre after which, according to the Jolases, instead of marrying Ponisowsky or returning to my movable home, la sua intenzione è di mettere qui casa a Parigi coll'infermiera. I showed her designs to Brauchbar who subscribed for a copy of her book e promised quando verrà[?] a Parigi quest'autunno di presentarla personalmente ai migliori etchers[?] di Parigi (he knows them for this past 40 years).

He wrote her a long letter of encouragement but all the women, including Lucia herself, said che quella che fece era un'asineria, bisognava lasciarla tranquilla. Lucia adoring "Mon père veut me pousser où je ne veux pas aller." Mme Jolas passed here on her way back to Feldkirch with her mother a 500% U.S.A. citizeness and secondo lei Lucia sta meglio, esce qualche volta sola, e se qualche volta fa il ghiribizzo di rifiutare di mangiare confessa essa stessa that she did it just to provoke people. Il mio parere personale è che Lucia è un grattacapi della più bell'acqua but that she has much more original inborn talent than nine tenth of those who float around Montparnasse. Questo è anch il parere di Brauchbar, un uomo del mestiere, of Gillet, a professional art critic and of Mrs and Mr Gideon [sic] two of the advanced German art movement, A proposito ti mando un acrostic di Beckett per me?? Gilbert is editing a J.J. number of *Contempo*. Mc Greevy declined to write for it and S.B. sent the enclosed. Ditemi, cari pargoletti, che cosa ne pensate.

The patron saints of Zurich, S. Thunder and S. Lightning, hang over the town ma il vino dei 5 cantoni francesi supera a mio modo di sentire tutti i vini del mondo intero. Find out about your respective cartes judiciaires in connection with removal of carte d'identité.

Dopo l'affare di quel malandrino Kugelhupfoff i francesi sono diventati assai severi. Thanks for the advice about our cartes d'identité ma avevo già fatto il necessario.

Mrs Jolas brought from Paris the news that Miss Beach and Miss Monnier had separated. Io non lo credo ma forse hanno fatto baruffa a causa di ME.

I am also sending you an article by Goll what rubbish! Ed egli è, dopo Curtius, la persona che parla per me ai tedeschi. Also in talk with Borach a few nights ago I found out che anche lui non comprende niente di quello che scrivo. I really do not know what to think. Is it all pretence and notoriety. Ne ho le tasche piene ad ogni modo—o piuttosto vuote.

I should like a photograph of you both with the child. Tante belle cose Babbo.<sup>77</sup>

This letter is exceptional because, as we saw, when writing to Helen and Giorgio, Joyce tended to keep his languages separate – possibly in order not to incur the irritation of his

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<sup>77</sup> Letter from 19.7.1932, Jahnke Bequest, Zürich James Joyce Foundation.

“complementary but most suspicious daughter in law.”<sup>78</sup> Here, conversely, we find a constant going back and forth between English and Italian. This provides a unique insight in Joyce’s complete bilingualism in English and Italian.

Joyce’s code-switching here also increases our comprehension of the extent of his bilingualism. As we saw in the previous chapter, code-switching is the seemingly arbitrary alternation of two (or more) languages within the same conversation, or even within a single sentence, and it is something that “affects practically everyone who is in contact with more than one language or dialect” (Gardner Chloros 4). Unlike previously thought, code-switching does not represent debasement of linguistic skill but is actually a sign of bilingual ability.

Thus, Joyce’s code-switching can be seen as a sign that he was completely bilingual, fully fluent in both his languages, and that his Italian was more than a foreign language he spoke well. The fact that Joyce was so thoroughly fluent in Italian, and that he consciously chose Italian and not his native-English as the language in which to communicate with his family must have had relevance for the works.

There has been some speculation as to *why* the Joyces adopted Italian as their family language. Ellmann suggests that it was mainly for sentimental reasons. After moving to Zurich, Ellmann writes, Joyce “and his family retained their loyalty to Trieste by speaking its language *en famille*” (389) and in Paris too “they continued nostalgically to speak Italian, Joyce insisting it was the easiest language on the voice” (ibid). Ellmann later adds that the practice of speaking Italian together was also the “only continuity” in the lives of Giorgio and Lucia, who were schlepped back and forth across Europe

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<sup>78</sup> It would be interesting to know *why* Joyce deviates from his usual linguistic habits in this letters – perhaps he was tired, in a hurry, emotional, annoyed? These are all circumstances in which bilingual people tend to engage more radically in code-switching, but one can only speculate.

throughout their youth, having to change schools and learn a new language every couple of years. Similarly, Francini Bruni writes that in Paris “Joyce initiated long discourses in Italian because he did not want the language forgotten” and because, according to him, “the language of family affection could only be Italian” (45).

Joyce was no stranger to sentimentality and as the Trieste period was, for many reasons, an important one in his life, nostalgia might certainly have been part of the reason. And Italian unquestionably brought some continuity in the lives of his children, although this was probably not a conscious move on the part of Joyce and Nora. Much as they loved their children, practical pedagogy was not really their forte. Of course, discovering a Beckettian “vrai mobile” for Joyce’s switch in family language is neither possible nor necessary, yet at the same time it is too important to just gloss over.

In the previous chapter, we saw that Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour has written about the painful struggle bilingual writers often experience with their two languages. When bilingual writers speak about their bilingualism, wrote Klosty Beaujour, “it is usually to complain” (29) and often they seem to feel “as though their bilingualism were unnatural and negative – a curse or a dread disease” (ibid.) There does not seem to be any of this in Joyce. Nowhere does he complain about his bilingualism, nowhere does he write about a struggle between his Italian and his English – and this is in spite of the fact that Italian was more than just the family language and a language for writing letters to his children.

From 1907 onwards Joyce lectured regularly in Italian at the Università del Popolare in Trieste, and he wrote a number of essays for *Il Piccolo della Sera*, the main daily newspaper of Trieste. Roberto Prezioso, the editor of *Il Piccolo* and also a former student of Joyce, had solicited these pieces and then asked Silvio Benco to correct

Joyce's articles, but Benco later recalled that there was "very little" that needed to be changed in the articles: Joyce's Italian "was a bit hard and cautious, but lacked neither precision nor expressiveness" (52) Corinna Del Greco Lobner reflects that this was in fact "a standard criticism of Triestine writers often guilty of *ipercorretismi*, the overly correct use of language" (25). Thus, paradoxically, Joyce's cautiousness might in fact be a sign of his fluency as a Triestine writer. It leads Lobner to conclude, "Italian for Joyce was not a foreign language but a creative tool he used with skill and originality" (1).

Similarly, in "The Language of Politics and the Politics of Language" Giorgio Melchiori wrote:

The fact is that for at least five years of his life Joyce was exclusively an Italian writer. From 1907 to 1912 all his public pronouncements (lectures and articles) were in Italian. His children were being brought up to speak Italian as their first language, while his creative writing in English was limited to the re-elaboration of the first three chapters of *A Portrait* (which he tried to destroy in 1911). It is easy at this point to see a linguistic dichotomy. For Joyce English is the language of creation while Italian is the language of everyday life and of his production in the fields of history, politics and literary criticism (109).

"In those years," Melchiori adds, "when his creative powers were at low ebb, Italian prevailed" (109). Of course, Joyce did also write "The Dead" over the course of 1907, the longest of the *Dubliners* stories and arguably the best. Moreover, rewriting the first chapters of the *Portrait* was not a minor feat but, rather, significant creative work in English. But otherwise Melchiori is right: after the Joyces' return, in March 1907, from their ten month stay in Rome practically all Joyce's nonfiction writing is in Italian, while the language for fiction remained English, in spite of the fact that Joyce was so thoroughly immersed in Italian otherwise. Even the short *Giacomo Joyce*, with its partly Italian title and its thoroughly Triestine subject matter, written at the end of these five

very Italian years, is still in English – though with considerably more Italian interspersed than in Joyce’s previous works.

The dichotomy Melchiori points out, between a language of fiction and a language of, basically, everything else, is interesting and might be the reason why Joyce did not experience the bilingual blues that Klosty Beaujour recognizes in other bilingual writers. Joyce’s oeuvre, though it becomes increasingly multilingual and progressively plays with myriad foreign tongues, keeps as its basic language English – even the polyglot explosion that is *Finnegans Wake* is still “basically English” (*FW* 116.26), inasmuch as it uses the syntax and sentence structure of English. No one will mistake this for a French novel: its patterns are those of the English language. It is interesting to note here that during this “Italian” period Joyce did threaten to unlearn English and write in French or Italian instead, as Stanislaus Joyce recounts in a diary entrance of April 1907 (Ellmann 397). Obviously he never made good on that threat, yet his bilingualism in Italian was significant for his work in other ways.

**“From the safe side of distance!” (*FW* 228,25): The Linguistic Distance of Italian**

Italian gave Joyce a physical distance from English. Any language may have accomplished this, French if he and Nora had stayed in Paris in 1904, German if Zürich had become their first permanent home, but it happened to be Italian. Joyce felt unencumbered in Italian. Francini Bruni describes that Joyce and Stanislaus would frequently exchange insults in Italian and concludes: “Apparently they found English a less effective instrument than Italian for venting their emotions” (43). Probably this has

not so much to do with the innate swearability of Italian compared to that of English but, rather, with the lack of inhibition Joyce felt in Italian. Ellmann observes:

His speech in Italian was freer than his speech in English, and gradually became more so. At first Francini could still shock him when, for instance, he said of the dog which, to Joyce's dismay, skulked around the Scuola Berlitz, 'Il cane ha pisciato nell'anticamera e ha lasciato uno stronzolo davanti alla tua aula.'<sup>79</sup> Joyce laughed and blushed like a girl. But soon Nora said to him, 'Since you've come to know Francini, I can't recognize you anymore' (215).

Cross-linguistic studies into emotions and multilingualism would suggest that it is not so much Francini's influence that changes Joyce, as the language they speak.

Psycholinguistic research has shown that late bilinguals (people who become bilingual as adults) experience visible "differences between levels of emotionality" depending on which of their languages they are using (Pavlenko, *Emotions and Multilingualism* 168).

This seems to be true especially for the "emotionally charged domain of taboo words" (ibid). Aneta Pavlenko cites research that argues

that taboo words constitute a nexus where language and emotions come together in an unprecedented manner. When processed, these words activate not only the semantic network but also the amygdala, eliciting autonomic arousal. This arousal can be detected through a variety of physiological measures, including sweating of palms and fingertips, a signal that can be quantified by measuring the transient increase in electrical conductivity of the skin (168-169)

Pavlenko adds that early studies already noted that bilingual subjects "were often reluctant to utter taboo words in the native language, but did not experience the same anxiety when using L2 taboo words" (169).

One such subject, a German-English bilingual woman, "had difficulties saying out loud L1 German childish terms for defecating, urinating, and the genitals" (id). Similarly, an English-Spanish bilingual man "always switched to L2 Spanish when talking about his

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<sup>79</sup> "The dog pissed in the hall and left a turd in front of your lecture room."

sexual activities ‘because speaking about sex in Spanish was less embarrassing for him’” (id). These studies were from the 1950s, but more recent research has corroborated these earlier findings. Pavlenko cites research from 2004 in which bilingual speakers were found to be “inhibited by the greater emotionality of the L1 taboo and swearwords and feel compelled to use their L2 equivalents” (172). One Greek-English bilingual subject said: “I have noticed that I can swear much more easily in English than in Greek,” and an English-Italian bilingual woman observed: “I prefer to express anger in my L2 Italian because I do not hear the weight of my words so everything comes out quite easily” (172).

As a consequence, a bilingual speaker can feel like a different person in his different languages. In “Language and Emotional Experience: The Voice of Translingual Memoir,” Mary Besemeres describes the English writer Tim Parks, who moved to Italy in his twenties and married an Italian woman. Parks wrote a book, *An Italian Education*, in which he portrays the gradual changes his personality underwent as a consequence of his being submerged in Italian. In this book, Parks describes himself “as changing, however reluctantly, under the influence of the language and the culture he now lives in, ‘becoming a little bit more Italian’ as he takes over, or gives in to, certain key idioms” (46).

It is likely that Joyce experienced something similar, and this would explain his Italian fights with his Irish brother and the increasingly vulgar language Nora detected in his speech. In fact, one may argue that Joyce’s writing in English too becomes freer under the influence of Italian. There are passages in *Ulysses* that are impossible to



imagine in the earlier works. In the “Circe” episode, for instance, we find private Carr who shouts all sorts of fun vulgarities:

PRIVATE CARR

*(tugging at his belt)* I'll wring the neck of any fucker says a word against my fucking king. (U 15.4598-4599)

PRIVATE CARR

*(loosening his belt, shouts)* I'll wring the neck of any fucking bastard says a word against my bleeding fucking king. (U 15.4644-4645)

PRIVATE CARR

*(with ferocious articulation)* I'll do him in, so help me fucking Christ! I'll wring the bastard fucker's bleeding blasted fucking windpipe! (U 15.4720-4721)

Similarly, in the final episode, “Penelope,” we find Molly Bloom thinking about her sexual exploits with the virile Boylan:

I wished he was here or somebody to let myself go with and come again like that I feel all fire inside me or if I could dream it when he made me spend the 2nd time tickling me behind with his finger I was coming for about 5 minutes with my legs round him I had to hug him after O Lord I wanted to shout out all sorts of things fuck or shit or anything at all (U 18.584-589).

And a little later:

Ill start dressing myself to go out presto non son piu forte Ill put on my best shift and drawers let him have a good eyeful out of that to make his micky stand for him Ill let him know if thats what he wanted that his wife is fucked yes and damn well fucked too up to my neck nearly not by him 5 or 6 times handrunning theres the mark of his spunk on the clean sheet I wouldnt bother to even iron it out that ought to satisfy him if you don't believe me feel my belly unless I made him stand there and put him into me Ive a mind to tell him every scrap and make him do it out in front of me serve him right its all his own fault if I am an adulteress (U 18.1508-1516)

Where living in Trieste gave Joyce a physical distance from English, speaking in Italian gave him a linguistic distance. That a distance from English was something he desired already emerged from his threat, mentioned above, to unlearn English and write in Italian or French instead. Joyce persistently admitted to feelings of unease with regard

to his mother tongue and expressed the view that the language in which he wrote was not his real language. He regarded English a “borrowed tongue” and viewed the Irish people as “doomed to express themselves in a language not their own” (Bruni 28). Remarks like these show the symbolic distance Joyce felt with regard to English, a distance he gave tangible form by adopting Italian as his new family language, as “the language of family affection.”

Through Stephen Dedalus, too, Joyce communicated this sense of distance from English, when he has him declare in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, that English, a language “so familiar and so foreign,” would always be for him “an acquired speech” (189). After discovering that he and his English-born Dean of Studies use different words for the same object, a “funnel” versus a “tundish,” Stephen reflects:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language (id).

The distance Stephen perceives between himself and the English language, the sense that English is not his mother tongue but something foreign in which he is destined to express himself, this notion of not belonging in his own language are crucial to Joyce’s assault upon English.

### **“Hoet of the rough throat attack” (FW 254.29): The Language Wars of Joyce and Kafka**

I use the word assault, with all its violent implications, because Joyce spoke about language in violent terms. In the above-mentioned letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, in

which Joyce wrote he had “declared war” on the English language (*JLL I* 237), the word war evokes images of brutality and bloodshed that are reinforced by his proclaimed desire to destroy English. Similarly, in *Finnegans Wake* there is reference to a “tong warfare” (*FW* 177.05) and we find the line “The war is in words” (*FW* 98.34-35), also suggesting a warlike attitude towards language.

When Joyce, through Stephen, claims of English that he has not “made or accepted its words,” he is also suggesting that he has not accepted its rules, that he feels no loyalty towards the grammatical regulations that hold the language together. Thus, his linguistic alienation is at the basis of his desire to destroy English. Although he wrote in a letter to Max Eastman that the destruction need not be permanent: “I’ll give them back their English language. I’m not destroying it for good” (*JLL I* 546).<sup>80</sup>

At the same time, however, these claims are also just bravado. The instances where he professed his love for English, “that best of languages” (Ellmann 397), are legion. The point is to inhabit English, to use it, but not to submit to its limits or its bounds – something that his sense of estrangement from the language, intensified by his increased bilingualism in Italian, allows him to do.

Here, I would like to suggest a comparison to Franz Kafka. Kafka is a different kind of author, considerably less linguistically experimental and certainly less multilingual, yet there are some remarkable and, I think, relevant similarities between Kafka and Joyce. Kafka’s sparse, unadorned style is completely devoid of the type of radically experimental multilingual play in which Joyce engages, and, unlike Joyce,

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<sup>80</sup> Joyce’s comment is reminiscent of Finley Peter Dunne, who wrote: “When we Americans are through with the English language, it will look as if it had been run over by a musical comedy” (quoted in Rischin xviii-xix).

Kafka does not seem interested in dislocating language. However, beneath this superficial difference lies an important and, for this study, a pertinent kinship.

Both Joyce and Kafka can be seen to work against language. Language, in their works, becomes a battlefield of sorts, a sight of conflict, of vexation that is, at times, almost violent. Because of the complex linguistic, political and national circumstances they confronted, their relation to language was a love/hate one, an intricate battle of tongues. Neither Joyce nor Kafka was able to regard his native language as completely his own, yet neither chose to write in an alternative language. Instead, they wrote in languages they did not consider their own, and attacked them as they wrote – an attack that both writers conducted by including foreign languages, Yiddish in the case of Kafka; Irish, Italian, Latin and myriad other languages in the case of Joyce. Michel Foucault has written that “discourse is the power which is to be seized” (110). If this is true, then Joyce and Kafka seized this power with all their might.

Joyce and Kafka were both born on the periphery of large empires, in what Pascale Casanova has called “dominated literary spaces” (127). Both viewed their hometowns as provincial, paralyzing and claustrophobic. In fact, referring to its marginal location, the Czech writer and friend of Kafka, Johannes Urzidil, has called Prague “the Dublin of the East” (Kuna 130). Joyce escaped Dublin early, because, as he put it in “Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages”: “No self-respecting person wants to stay in Ireland. Instead he will run from it, as if from a country that has been subjected to a visitation by an angry Jove” (*Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing* 123), a sentiment echoed by Little Chandler, who, reflecting on Gallaher’s accomplishments in London, ponders: “There was no doubt about it: if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could

do nothing in Dublin” (*Dubliners* 70). Like Gallaher, Joyce fled Dublin to seek, and find, his success abroad.

Kafka, on the other hand, did not manage to leave Prague until shortly before his death – when his health forced him to visit sanatoria abroad. He made many plans to leave, but he never did. The “Kleine Mutter mit Krallen,” the “little mother with claws,” as he called Prague,<sup>81</sup> had her hooks firmly secured and would not let him go. Thus, for most of his life, Kafka lived, studied and worked in the place he grew up: the Jewish neighbourhood of Prague. A friend of Kafka reports how one day, as the two of them were standing in front of a window looking down on the Town Square, Kafka said, signalling to the surrounding buildings: “‘There was my Gymnasium [secondary school], over there, in the building that faces towards us, was the university, and a short way to the left was my office. Within this small circle’ – drawing a few circles with his fingers – ‘my whole life is enclosed’” (Wagenbach 14). In fact, he barely managed to move out of his parents’ apartment: at thirty-eight he was still living at home, if reluctantly.

Yet even though Joyce lived most of his adult life in Europe and only went back to Ireland a few times, his works are unmistakably Irish. Except for *Giacomo Joyce*, with its Triestine setting, they are all set in Dublin and populated by Irish characters that tend to speak a recognizably Irish form of English – one has only to think of, for instance, the “Cyclops” episode of *Ulysses*, filled with Dublin slang and Irishisms (“Devil a much” (*U* 12.13),<sup>82</sup> “Sure I’m after seeing him not five minutes ago” (*U* 12.323), “*Sinn Fein!* says the citizen. *Sinn fein amhain!*” (*U* 12. 523), “I will, says he, *a chara*, to show there’s no

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. Sabine Rothemann’s study *Kleine Mutter mit Krallen - Franz Kafka und das alte Prag: Betrachtendes Denken und Raumentwurf in der frühen Prosa*.

<sup>82</sup> Echoing Nora’s “Divil up I’ll get till you come back.”

ill feeling” *U* 12.751, “Begob he was what you might call flabbergasted” (*U* 12.337), “*Slan leat*, says he” (*U* 12.819), et cetera).

Kafka’s fiction, conversely, as Max Brod, Kafka’s friend, editor, literary executor and biographer, has noted, never once even mentions the word Jew.<sup>83</sup> His characters are not noticeably Jewish, and they use none of the Yiddishisms that were typically part of the vocabulary of an assimilated Jew. Kafka wrote a German purged of nearly all local influence. As Ritchie Robertson has written: “He was a linguistic Purist who took pains with spelling, vocabulary” in order to adjust to the “High German standard” (*Kafka* 27).

Their different reactions with regard to their hometown – a rebellious departure versus a more passive, and perhaps fearful staying behind – seem reflected in the way they dealt with language. However, a careful examination of Kafka’s language in comparison with that of Joyce shows that while outwardly adhering to the rules of standard High German, underneath the surface Kafka opens up language to foreign elements in ways strongly resembling the rebelliousness of Joyce, and the comparison to Kafka helps accentuate the ways in which Joyce inhabits English. Joyce employs English uneasily and undertakes to break away from Victorian English. As we saw, he never made good on his threat to “unlearn English,” but instead labors from within English in ways that the juxtaposition with Kafka elucidates. The multilingual play that in Joyce’s work happens above the surface, in plain view, in Kafka goes on underneath, in the underworld of language, yet, as we shall see, these two different approaches are in reality two sides of the same coin.

Like Joyce, Kafka too confessed to feelings of unease regarding German, the language in which he wrote and in which he was brought up, and we find the same kind

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<sup>83</sup> Cf. Ronald Hayman 6.

of linguistic alienation in Kafka as we did in Joyce. Where Joyce considered English a “borrowed tongue,” Kafka felt trapped by the sense “that German was not really his language,” as his biographer Ronald Hayman relates (252). In a diary entrance from 1911, Kafka wrote, echoing Stephen:

Gestern fiel mir ein, dass ich die Mutter nur deshalb nicht immer so geliebt habe, wie sie es verdiente weil mich die Deutsche Sprache daran gehindert hat. Die jüdische Mutter ist keine ‚Mutter‘. Die mit Mutter benannte jüdische Frau wird nicht nur komisch sondern auch fremd (*Tagebücher* 82). (Yesterday it occurred to me that I did not always love my mother as she deserved, because the German language prevented it. The Jewish mother is no ‘Mutter’. A Jewish woman who is called ‘Mutter’ does not just become comical but strange (*Diaries* 88)).

The Yiddish word for Yiddish is “mamaloshon,” or “mother-tongue,” and for Kafka, ironically, German can never be as maternal a language as Yiddish, even though Yiddish was never his “real” mother tongue but a language he had acquired through studying. Thus, in Kafka we find a similar type of social and cultural estrangement from language as we do in Joyce. German alienates Kafka from all that is familiar. He cannot use the German word “Mutter” without experiencing a Joycean “unrest of spirit.”

The use of German by Jews has something illicit for Kafka and, accordingly, in a letter to Max Brod he likens it to the appropriation of someone else’s property, something not earned, but stolen.<sup>84</sup> Jewish writing in German is a „Zigeunerliteratur die das deutsche Kind aus der Wiege gestohlen und in großer Eile irgendwie zugerichtet hatte, weil doch irgendjemand auf dem Seil tanzen muss“ (*Briefe* 338) (“a gypsy literature which has stolen the German child out of its cradle and in great haste put it through some kind of training, for someone has to dance on the tightrope” (*Letters* 287)). It is

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<sup>84</sup> Cf. Kafka, *Briefe*: „die laute oder stillschweigende oder auch selbstquälerische Anmassung eines fremden Besitzes, den man nicht erworben, sondern durch einen (verhältnismässig) flüchtigen Griff gestohlen hat“ (336). („the loud or silent or even self-torturing appropriation of someone else’s property, that one has not earned, but stolen by means of a (relatively) hasty movement” (*Letters* 286)). Further references to both works will be cited parenthetically in the text.

significant that Joyce too connects writing to theft, when he has *Finnegans Wake* announce itself to be “the last word in stolentelling” (*FW* 424.35). Thus, Joyce and Kafka both compare language to something borrowed, or stolen, something not really their own.<sup>85</sup>

As a consequence of this problematic relation to the mother tongue, Joyce and Kafka try to destabilize language, as a way to re-appropriate it. They feel alienated from language and alter it so that they may feel more at home. The most important way in which this process of destabilization takes place in their works is by making them multilingual.

That Joyce’s texts are multilingual hardly needs proving. *Ulysses* features myriad foreign languages (in fact, the very first snippet of speech we encounter is in Latin), Dublin slang, and Irishisms, and successfully exploits double-meanings of sounds and homonyms across linguistic borders. This adds not just to an increased sense of language as a living thing, but also to a heightened awareness of the materiality of language.

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<sup>85</sup> In his essay *Le monolinguisme de l’autre*, an autobiographical account of his relation to language as a French Algerian, framed as a dialogue between two nameless speakers, Derrida writes: “Je n’ai qu’une langue, ce n’est pas la mienne” (“I only have one language; it is not mine,”) (13) to which his interlocutor replies: “Comment pourrait-on avoir une langue qui ne soit pas la sienne?” (“How can anyone have a language that is not theirs?”) (15) In a way, Joyce and Kafka give an answer to this question. Derrida, as a Franco-Maghrebian Jew, felt estranged from French without having an alternative language in which to write or in which to express himself. His interlocutor accuses him of sophistry and exclaims: “voilà que vous alléguez, en français, que le français vous a toujours été langue étrangère! Allons donc, si c’était vrai, vous ne sauriez même pas le dire, vous ne sauriez si bien dire!” (“there you are, claiming, in French, that French has always been a foreign language to you! Come off it! If that were true, you would not even know how to say it; you would not know how to say it so well!”) (18) Yet Derrida’s assertions make perfect sense with regard to Joyce and Kafka, of whom the same thing might be said: in perfect English and German they claim that they are estranged from English and German. Where Derrida was unable to feel at home in the Frenchness of the French that was his mother tongue, Kafka could not feel at home in the Germanness of German, nor Joyce in the Englishness of English. For Kafka and Joyce, German and English are foreign languages as well as the mother tongue; they are, as Stephen reflected, both familiar and foreign.



The “Proteus” episode is one place where Joyce uses a lot of foreign words and expressions. Through Stephen’s fluency in, among others, French, Joyce here plays with homonyms between English and French. As Stephen walks along the strand towards the Pigeonhouse, for instance, he is reminded of a line from *La Vie de Jesus* by Leo Taxil, in which Taxil imagines Joseph’s reaction when he finds Mary impregnated but not by himself: “Qui vous a mis dans cette fichue position? C’est le pigeon, Joseph” (*U* 3.161-62). This then prompts the following train of thought in Stephen: “My father’s a bird, he lapped the sweet *lait chaud* with pink young tongue, plump bunny’s face. Lap, lapin.” (*U* 3.165-66). The French “lait chaud” in connection with the English “bunny’s face” triggers the association between “lap” and “lapin,” rabbit. Juliette Taylor has pointed out that Joyce here uses the semantic ambiguity intrinsic to “interlingual communication” to create a new figure of speech, a compound image in which “a person drinking milk is represented, through a *faux ami*, as a rabbit lapping milk” (Taylor, “Foreign Music” 412).

This instance is resumed, and parodied, in “Circe”, arguably the most multilingual episode of *Ulysses*. Upon Kitty Rickett’s mentioning of “Mary Shortall that was in the lock with the pox she got from Jimmy Pidgeon” (*U* 15.2578-2579), Philip Drunk asks: “(gravely) Qui vous a mis dans cette fichue position, Philippe?”, to which Philip Sober responds: “(gaily) C’était le sacré pigeon, Philippe” (*U* 15. 2582-2585). “Circe” continues to parody Stephen’s French musings from “Proteus,” as when Zoe begs him to give her “some parleyvoo.” (*U* 15.3875) Stephen complies and advertises the many sexual amusements to be found in Paris. This he does in a broken English interspersed with French (a taunting reminder of the “Proteus” instance where Stephen recollects how, on his way back to Dublin from Paris, he pretended “to speak broken English as you

dragged your valise, porter threepence, across the slimy pier at Newhaven. *Comment?*” (U 3.194-195): “All chic womans which arrive full of modesty then disrobe and squeal loud to see vampire man debauch nun very fresh young with *dessous troublants*. (he clacks his tongue loudly) *Ho, là là! Ce pif qu’il a!*” (U 15.3891-3894).

The whores are pleased with Stephen’s performance and encourage him with shouts of “Bravo! Parleyvoo!” (U 15.3898) and “Encore! Encore!” (U 15. 3920), while Lynch exclaims “*Vive le vampire!*” (U 15.3896). Both Stephen’s “vampire man” and Lynch’s *vampire* constitute an allusion to the short poem Stephen writes in “Proteus” (“He comes, pale vampire, through storm his eyes, his bat sails bloodying the sea, mouth to her mouth’s kiss” (U 3.397-398)), strengthening the idea of a parody on this episode. Lynch’s call can also be seen as a play on the expression “Vive la France” and thus as a more general reference to Stephen’s recollections of Paris in that episode, and to Stephen’s reflections in and on French. Thus, “Circe” seems to caricature the multilingualism of “Proteus,” while at the same time constituting an intensification of the multiplicity of languages to be found there.

*Finnegans Wake* continues the Protean play with semantic ambiguity and multilingual puns, albeit in a more radical manner. In fact, it makes it a central given of its narrative; *Finnegans Wake* is really one big example of interlingual compound words and images and multilingual puns. Joyce himself called *Finnegans Wake* “a tower of Babel” where “all the languages are present” (quoted in John Anderson 33), (and in the book repeatedly refers to the biblical myth of the “turrace of Babbel” (FW 199.31), of “Rockaby, Babel, flatten a wall” (FW 278.20-21)), yet although not quite *all* languages

are present, it does draw, according to Laurent Milesi, from over seventy different ones (“L’*diome Babelien* 173).<sup>86</sup>

Here, Joyce not just forces open the borders of English to an explosion of foreign languages, but challenges the idea of any standard, monolingual idiom by creating a new multilingual language not bound to any of the rules of grammar and syntax which usually tie writing down. The hundred-letter thunderword that introduces the Babel passage is an apt example. Here can be found, in one word, the edict “shut the door” in nine different languages:

“Lukkedoerendunandurraskewdylooshoofermoyporertooryzoosphalnabortansporthaokansakroidverjkapakkapuk.” (*FW* 257.27-28)

Roland McHugh has traced the origins of this word as follows: “Lukkedoer” is the Danish “luk døren,” “dunandurrass” is the Irish “dún an doras,” “kewdyloosho” is a phonetic rendering of the Italian “chiudi l’uscio,” “fermoyporte” is the French “fermes la porte,” “tooryzoo” sounds like the German “Türe zu,” “sphalnabortan” is the Greek “sphalna portan,” “sporthaok” is the slangy “sport one’s oak,” to keep one’s door shut, “sakroidver” is the Russian “zakroi dver”, and “kapakkapuk” refers to the Turkish “kapiyi kapat” (257). The comical image that this insane multilingual word evokes is that of a large crowd of people from different national backgrounds all shouting together to “SHUT THE DOOR!” Yet it is not just a semantic repetition, for as the signified traverses from language to language it seems to lose all meaning.

Thus, the additional languages do not add meaning but rather result in reducing meaning. At the same time, however, a word this long inevitably contains other words,

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<sup>86</sup> John Bishop gives a slightly lesser count. According to him, Joyce used between 60 and 70 languages in *Finnegans Wake*. (Bishop xi)

which, paradoxically, open it up to a multiplicity of meanings: Fermoy is also town in county Cork, “kapakka” is Finish for tavern (McHugh 257), “kapuk” sounds like the German “kaput,” or “broken”, “loos” can mean “lost” or “wrong” in Dutch, and then there are the multitude of English words to be found, such as “zoo,” “askew,” “hoof,” “porter,” and probably many more. In this way, a seemingly endless amount of different connotations is conjured up, resulting in a confusion of tongues and signification.

Ellmann told how Joyce, while writing *Ulysses*, remarked “I’d like a language which is above all languages [...] I cannot express myself in English without enclosing myself in a tradition.” (*JLL I* 397) This is, of course, precisely what he accomplishes in *Finnegans Wake*. Here, Joyce is truly “au bout de l’anglais” (*JLL I* 546), or, as *Finnegans Wake* proclaims of itself, “this is nat language at any sinse of the world” (*FW* 83.12). Yet at the same time, *Finnegans Wake* is still very much English in so far as it clearly uses the syntax and sentence structure of English. Thus, although Joyce is “au bout de l’anglais” in one sense – he is not following the grammatical rules of Standard English and forces open the borders of English to let in whatever foreign language he fancies – he is also not. It is here that a comparison with Kafka is illuminating.

If Joyce is waging an open war against the English language, Kafka is more of a guerrilla warrior. In Kafka, the “other” languages are never present on the surface. His perfect standard German is devoid of any local influences or foreign words. Yet this seeming referential regard for German is illusory: underneath the strictures of standard idiom Kafka opens up his language to an intricate play on Yiddish, Yiddishisms, and anti-Semitic slurs that is not apparent at first glance.

If German used by Jews is something like a stolen child, it is a thievery that Kafka appreciates. In a lecture he gave on the Yiddish language in 1912, as an introduction to a performance of Yiddish poems by his friend, the actor Yitzhak Löwy, he calls it a “Gaunersprache” (189), thieves cant, and celebrates its Wakean ability to take words from other languages.

This lecture is a key piece. Growing up, Kafka was not interested in Judaism. In his upbringing, Judaism “meant less a commitment to religious tradition than a setting for Kafka senior’s social ascent, marked by his repeated moves to smarter Synagogues” (Robertson, “Dates in Palestine” 334). His family, assimilated and Westernized Jews, hardly observed Jewish customs and his father mocked most things Jewish.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, Kafka felt estranged from Judaism – as he writes in his diary: “Was habe ich mit Juden gemeinsam? Ich habe kaum etwas mit mir gemeinsam” (255), “What do I have in common with the Jews? I barely have anything in common with myself” (252).<sup>88</sup>

This changed when he met a group of Yiddish actors from Lemberg, directed by the Polish Jew Yitzhak Löwy. They were poor, performed in the seedy café Savoy dressed in shabby costumes, and their plays were bad, but Kafka loved them and attended over thirty of their performances. He became friends with Löwy, and under his influence started learning about Jewish history and Yiddish literature. Löwy and the Yiddish actors showed Kafka a way of being a Jew that was different from the assimilated Judaism of Prague, of his parents, who were either secretly or openly embarrassed to be Jewish and wanted to show the world that Jews were as good as gentiles.

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<sup>87</sup> Hayman points out that “the odd words of Yiddish that survived in his father’s vocabulary were mostly expletive” (17), illustrated by a diary entrance of Kafka where he records how his father referred to Max Brod as a “meschuggenen Ritoch” (*Tagebücher* 94), a “crazy hothead” (*Diaries* 98).

<sup>88</sup> Judaism here is a reference to race rather than religion.

Jacques Kohn, the fictionalized version of Yitzhak Löwy in Isaac Bashevis Singer's story "A Friend of Kafka," puts it well: "Kafka wanted to be a Jew, but he didn't know how... He was sunk to the neck in the bourgeois swamp. The Jews of his circle had one ideal—to become Gentiles, and not Czech Gentiles but German Gentiles" (14). Löwy and the Yiddish actors, on the other hand, represented an unself-conscious form of Judaism. Their identity as Jews was completely independent of the Christian world and they possessed a sense of identity that Kafka lacked but longed for.

Having himself started to regain his Jewish consciousness at the Yiddish theatre,<sup>89</sup> he wanted to expose the Jews of Prague to its influence so that it might have the same effect on them. He organized the evening of Yiddish poetry and wrote his introductory lecture – which caused him much stress and doubts but which was very well received.

In the lecture, Kafka describes Yiddish as a disorganized and incongruous force, a continuous flux that will not be caught and pinned down in any written grammar. It belongs to the people, who will guard it against the grammarians and will make sure that it remains a spoken language – as we saw before, in a similar way Joyce rejected both English and Irish in favor of Hiberno-English as what Milesi has called "the unruly, because uncoded, but living language of the people" ("Perversions" 113).

According to Kafka, Yiddish consists exclusively of foreign words. Typical of the ever-changing nature of Yiddish, Kafka wrote, these *Fremdwörter* "ruhen aber nicht in

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. also Robertson, *Kafka* 21. In his diary Kafka wrote, for instance, in reaction to one of the Yiddish plays: "Bei manchen Liedern, der Aussprache 'jüdische Kinderlach', manchem Anblick dieser Frau, die auf dem Podium, weil sie Jüdin ist uns Zuhörer weil wir Juden sind an sich zieht, ohne Verlangen oder Neugier nach Christen, ging mir ein Zittern über die Wangen" (58). ("Some songs, the expression 'Yiddische Kinderlach,' some of this woman's acting [who, on the stage, because she is a Jew, draws us listeners to her because we are Jews, without any longing for or curiosity about Christians] made my cheeks tremble" (65)). Thus, through his dealings with Löwy and the Yiddish theatre, Kafka gradually came to feel that he might have something in common with the Jews after all.

ihm, sondern behalten die Eile und Lebhaftigkeit, mit der sie genommen wurden” (151), (they “are not firmly rooted in it, but retain the speed and liveliness with which they were adopted” (264)), they remain part of their original languages once they are contained within Yiddish. Thus, like *Finnegans Wake*, Yiddish seems more a structure for holding together different foreign languages than a language with its own distinct identity.

Additionally, there are the many dialects of which “diese Sprachgebilde von Willkür und Gesetz” (190) (“this medley of whim and law” (264)) is comprised: “Ja der ganze Jargon besteht nur aus Dialekt” (id) (“Yiddish as a whole exists only of dialect” (id)), a notion that seems to foreshadow Kafka’s later claim to Brod that in German, only the dialects are really alive.<sup>90</sup> According to Kafka, Yiddish is the quintessential foreign language, because even within itself it is foreign. This is precisely what Kafka values in Yiddish: its capacity to take pleasure in the foreign as a living presence “in one’s mother tongue” (Suchoff 254).

Kafka opened up German to the foreignness of Yiddish. A good example is “Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse” (“Josephine the Singer or the Mouse People,”), the last story Kafka wrote, just months before his death in June 1924, and published posthumously Brod. Here he takes up the concept of *mauscheln*. *Mauscheln* comes from Moyshe, the Yiddish for Moses, and is a disparaging term for the particular accent and intonation of Jews speaking German. Kafka himself liked *mauscheln*, and in a letter to Brod even called it beautiful, yet Germans ridiculed Jews for it. Richard Wagner, for instance, complained about the “hissing, abrasive sound” of *mauscheln*, “a shrill, sibilant buzzing” which falls “strangely and unpleasantly on our ears” (quoted in Mark Anderson, *Kafka’s Clothes* 197). “The Jew,” wrote Wagner, still speaks German “as a

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<sup>90</sup> Cf. Suchoff 253.

foreigner” (ibid). For Wagner (and not just for Wagner), it is the foreignness, the strangeness that *mauscheln* opens up within German to which he objects.

Mauscheln might literally mean speaking like Moses, but it also connotes the German *Maus*, mouse.<sup>91</sup> And so, Kafka creates a story that centers on an actual mouse people and on their singer, Josephine, who, in her prophet-like function of bringing the people together – “ein Publikum zusammenrufen” (221) – also constitutes a more literal allusion to Moses. Josephine is a female mouse Moses who gives her people a point around which to gather, a centre and an identity, similar to what Moses accomplished for the Jewish people.

The connection between the mouse people and the Jews, that is, the stereotypical image of Jews that anti-Semitism suggests, is fortified by the very beginning of the story, which explains the mysterious power of Josephine’s song: “Es gibt niemanden, den ihr Gesang nicht fortreißt, was um so höher zu bewerten ist, als unser Geschlecht im ganzen Musik nicht liebt (219)” (“There is no one but is carried away by her singing, a tribute all the greater as we are not in general a music-loving race” (360)). This seems a tongue in cheek reply to accusations made by people like Otto Weininger, Jewish philosopher turned protestant anti-Semite, who in his famous study *Sex and Character* writes that “the Jew doesn’t sing” and that Jews have a “curious aversion to song” (quoted in Mark Anderson, *Kafka’s Clothes* 207). In this way, Kafka generates a fictional literalization of what is at heart a racist slur. By inverting the metaphoric expression *mauscheln* and taking it literally he exploits the gap between the denotative and the figurative meaning of

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<sup>91</sup> Something that Art Spiegelman plays with as well in his graphic novel *Maus*, in which Jews are drawn as mice. (Germans are cats, Polish pigs, and Americans are dogs.)



the term. On the surface he never strays outside the borders of canonical high German, yet he manages to turn the language inside out and expose its fear for foreign elements.

Kafka does something similar in the story “Forschungen eines Hundes” (“Investigations of a Dog”), written in 1922, published posthumously, and given its title by Brod. Here, we find a play on the Yiddish concept of *Luftmensch*, or “airperson.” This term is used to denote an impractical, contemplative person without a definite business or income, someone who is a parasite to society. Assimilated Jews would use it to designate – and denigrate – lesser-integrated Yiddish artists from Eastern Europe – such as Kafka’s friend Löwy. Kafka takes up this notion and plays with it, creating a story centering on a group of airdogs, *Lufthunde*, instead of airpeople. Like their stereotypical counterpart in the Jewish world of Kafka’s Prague, the *Lufthunde* are fully dependent on their fellow dogs, but unlike their human equivalents they are not scorned for this because, as the dog-narrator relates, “versucht man sich in ihre Lage zu versetzen, versteht man es” (*Nachgelassene Schriften* 463) (“if one tries to put oneself in their place one will see that” (*Complete Stories* 295)).

Although it is unclear what the airdogs contribute to society, their presence is accepted and appreciated, the other dogs are convinced that in their own way the airdogs make a valuable contribution to the dog-society. Just because one cannot see or understand what exactly it is that the airdogs accomplish, that does not automatically mean that they do not accomplish anything – a humorous attack on the attitude of “civilized” Jews to their more artistic and unassimilated brothers.

As a last example, let us look at Kafka’s famous parable “Vor dem gesetz” (“Before the Law”). Here, a “man from the country,” a “Mann vom Lande” waits his

entire life for permission to be admitted to the Law, only to die without having been able to secure the desired consent. “Mann vom Lande” is a translation from the Yiddish *amoretz*, which comes from the Hebrew *amha-aretz*, and means not only “a man from the country,” but also a *schlemiel*, a fool. This does not just enforce the idea that the man from the country is banned from the law for his apparent ignorance, but, as David Suchoff points out, also implies the notion that he might be barred because of “the different languages he brings to the door of the Law” (251).

Thus, unlike Joyce, who violates language in plain view and plays with foreign languages on the surface of his narrative, above ground as it were, Kafka goes underground, underneath the language. Where Joyce assaults language overtly, for all to see, and, moreover, loudly – after all, the hundred letter thunderword that starts the Babel passage in *Finnegans Wake* significantly concludes with a call for “Byfall” (“Beifall” is German for applause) and “Upploud!”, a play both on “applaud” and “loud” (*FW* 257.29-30) – Kafka assaults language silently, from within. This difference is captured symbolically by the different way in which they adapt Homer’s Sirens tale.

### **Of Sirens Silent and Loud**

Both Joyce and Kafka took up the ancient Homeric myth of Odysseus’ encounter with the alluring Sirens and, in typical modernist fashion, transform it into something that diverges thoroughly from its Homeric counterpart. In Homer, Odysseus’ men stuff their ears with wax, and tie their captain to the mast so that Odysseus can hear the famous Siren song without being in danger of fleeing towards the Sirens and towards a certain death.

In Kafka's parable "Das Schweigen der Sirenen", "The Silence of the Sirens", conversely, we find a different kind of Odysseus. Kafka wrote this tale in October 1917, during an eight-month visit with his sister Ottla in the Bohemian town of Zürau, shortly after he was diagnosed with the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him, and it became part of a small collection of parables posthumously published as the "Zürau Aphorisms." Here, we encounter an Odysseus who is tied to the mast *and* stops his ears with wax, and is very proud of his shrewdness. It is part of the klutzy version of Odysseus that Kafka creates; a bit of a fool who relies on "kindische Mittel" (88) ("childish measures") for his survival (89), and who, "in unschuldiger Freude über seine Mittelchen" (id) ("in innocent elation over his little stratagem") (id), does not realise that he will not need the wax if he has the chains.

At the end of Kafka's tale, the Sirens too have changed: they no longer want to seduce – which in Homer is the only thing they are able to do – but instead have been seduced by Odysseus: "sie wollten nicht mehr verführen, nur noch den Abglanz vom großen Augenpaar des Odysseus wollten sie so lange als möglich erhaschen" (90) ("they no longer had any desire to allure; all that they wanted was to hold as long as they could the radiance that fell from Ulysses' great eyes" (91)).

In Joyce's "Sirens" we see a similar diversion from the original. Where in the *Odyssey* the Sirens' seduction and their music are one (the Sirens are seductive by means of their singing) in Joyce's episode music and seduction are separate. On the one hand there are the Siren barmaids who try to tempt male customers, on the other there is the music, the singing and piano playing of the men in the bar of the Ormond hotel. It is this music that Bloom struggles to resist, since he does not want to be moved too much during

this emotional time of day, the moment of Molly's rendezvous with Boylan. Thus, for Bloom, seduction lies in the music more than in the desirable Siren-like barmaids. In fact, the barmaids do not even try to seduce Bloom, they are much more interested in Boylan. Here, then, we have Sirens who seem clueless as to whom they are supposed to seduce. And as in Kafka, in Joyce too we find a changed Odysseus. Where in Kafka he seems to have exchanged his mythical guile for guilelessness, in Joyce the shrewd prince has become a "seedy advertisement canvasser" (Bradbury and McFarlane 405).

There is another difference between Joyce's and Kafka's adaptation of Homer's tale. In Joyce's "Sirens" episode noise abounds; it is, arguably, one of the very loudest chapters in the novel. The episode is filled not only with the singing and piano playing of the men in the bar, but also with an abundance of talking, joking, farting, laughing and backslapping, with the clinking of glasses, the rattling of china, and with the cheers and applause after each song is finished. People walk in and out, leather shoes creak on the bar floor, trams pass noisily by, and the Siren barmaids are constantly humming and singing. In Joyce's "Sirens," the communicative function of language becomes secondary to its musical effects, causing an estrangement that is similar to the kind produced by his multilingualism.

Kafka's "Das Schweigen der Sirenen," is, as the title suggests, not just a silent tale but a tale about silence. If the song of the Sirens is powerful, their silence is an even more devastating weapon, and this silence permeates the short narrative. In Kafka's parable, there is no noise whatsoever: the Sirens do not sing, and Odysseus has his ears plugged, he would not have been able to hear them if they *had* sang after all. The description of the Sirens as Odysseus passes them by reads almost like the scene from a

pantomime: “Sie aber - schöner als jemals - streckten und drehten sich, ließen das schaurige Haar offen im Winde wehen und spannten die Krallen frei auf den Felsen” (90), “But they – lovelier than ever – stretched their necks and turned, let their cold hair flutter free in the wind, and forgetting everything clung with their claws to the rocks” (91) all in complete silence.

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to another one of Kafka’s parables. In the short, four-line tale “Der Schacht von Babel” (“the Pit of Babel”), another one of the Zürau aphorisms, an unnamed character announces he wants to dig a subterranean passage, because he finds his station much too high. At the end of the tale the narrator announces: “Wir graben den Schacht von Babel” (34) (“we are digging the pit of Babel” (35)). If Joyce’s multilingual approach is an overt celebration of linguistic diversity, and if *Finnegans Wake* is a vociferous performance of the Babelian confusion (“Rockaby, Babel, flatten a wall” (*FW* 278.4)) then perhaps Kafka’s subterranean approach is the creation of a pit of Babel, a polyglot underworld existing silently underneath the tip of canonical High German. Where Joyce builds up, Kafka digs down, yet both authors work from within the languages they inhabit so uneasily, both work on a Babelian solution to their unease.

## Chapter Three

### Comment Dire:

### Beckett between English and French

Heavenly father, the creature was bilingual.  
(Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks*)

folie-  
folie que de-  
que de-  
comment dire  
(Beckett, "Comment Dire")

Samuel Beckett's bilingualism determined the essence of his work.<sup>92</sup> Beckett critics have recognized the importance of Beckett's bilingualism,<sup>93</sup> but attention has focused mainly on his translations, self-translations and on comparisons of the different versions of each of his texts.<sup>94</sup> This is understandable, as there are not many writers who have written almost each of their works twice. Yet I think this emphasis on his practice of (self-)

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<sup>92</sup> Describing her lifelong "to and fro" between Spanish and English, the bilingual writer Silvia Molloy (!) writes: "I have dwelled on this shuttling between languages because it is the very stuff of my writing. It is often exhilarating, liberating; it is also laborious, fatiguing" (70).

<sup>93</sup> This in spite of Nancy Huston's claim to the contrary: "I've always felt that critics paid insufficient attention to the influence of bilingualism on [Beckett's] style" (64).

<sup>94</sup> To name just a few: Ruby Cohn, "Samuel Beckett Self-Translator"; R.J. Davis, "Beckett as Translator"; *Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett*, Ed. A.W. Friedman; Steven Connor, "Traduttore, Traditore: Samuel Beckett's Translation of *Mercier et Camier*"; Mary Ann Caws, "Samuel Beckett Translating"; Chiara Montini, "Watt et le passage au français: emancipation ou assujettissement?"; Brian T. Fitch *Beckett and Babel: An Investigation into the Status of the Bilingual Work*; Sinéad Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine: Beckett and Translation*.

A rare exception to this is an article by Ann Beer from 1985. Looking at the manuscript of *Watt*, Beer suggests that during the writing of this novel, French became increasingly dominant in Beckett's mind. This is a hugely important suggestion that was, however, never picked up by subsequent Beckett scholars. I will refer to her article in more detail later in this chapter.

translation has distracted from the way Beckett's bilingualism inflected his writing in the first place.

### Beckett's French

The story of Beckett's bilingualism is well known. Beckett's relation with the French language started unusually early, beginning in kindergarten at the age of five.<sup>95</sup> He continued studying French in preparatory school, with the former French master and semi-native Alfred Le Peton, and continued in boarding school at Portora Royal, where a former classmate remembers that "he was already very good at French" (Knowlson, *Beckett Remembering* 23).

So when, at the age of seventeen, Beckett started studying French at Trinity College in 1923, he had already been exposed to the language for twelve years. At Trinity he chose French, together with Italian, as his honors subject and his French professor, Thomas Brown Rudmose-Brown (himself a poet writing both in English and in French) recalls that Beckett was the best student in his year, both in French and in Italian. According to Rudmose-Brown, Beckett spoke and wrote French "like a Frenchman of the highest education" (Knowlson, *Beckett Remembering* 77). In the summer of 1926 he spent a month travelling in France in order to improve his spoken French, and upon his return he befriended Alfred Péron, who had come to Trinity as an exchange *lecteur* and who "helped enormously with Beckett's spoken and written French" (*DTF* 79).

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<sup>95</sup> My account of Beckett's French studies largely rehearses James Knowlson's detailed description in *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, with a view of serving my discussion. Although the focus of this excellent biography is not on Beckett's linguistic development, Knowlson's book is nevertheless the most exhaustive source on the topic. Cf. especially pages 43, 49, 57, 63-69, 77, 79, 96, 123-125. All references to Knowlson's *Damned to Fame* will be cited parenthetically in the text as *DTF*.

Beckett received his Bachelor of Arts in modern languages in 1927, placing first in his class, and moved to Paris to take up an exchange lectureship at the École Normale Supérieure. Here he stayed two years, consolidating his spoken French, and then returned to Trinity to become a lecturer in French literature. That this lecturing was not a great success is well-known, but what is less well-known is that this period led to Beckett's first creative writing in French. In November 1930, he gave a humorous talk in French to the Modern Language Society at Trinity. Entitled "Le Concentrisme" the talk discussed the life and times of Jean du Chas, a fictional French poet (later to reappear in Beckett's *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*). It parodied the "learned literary lecture" (*DTF* 124) and,<sup>96</sup> according to Ruby Cohn, was written in the spirit of a Normalian hoax, inspired by Beckett's two "Parisian" years at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (Beckett, *Disjecta* 169).

Deciding that an academic career was not for him, Beckett roamed around Europe for a few years, living in London, spending a long time in Germany, and often travelling back to Ireland, until he finally settled permanently in Paris in 1937, which continued to be his home for the next 52 years.

Shortly after moving to Paris, Beckett started writing articles and poetry in French and, as he wrote to Thomas MacGreevy, he had the feeling that "any poems there may happen to be in the future will be in French" (quoted in *DTF* 270). During these early Paris years, Beckett also translated *Murphy* into French, together with Péron, and, as Knowlson points out, a letter from the fall of 1938 to George Reavey shows that he

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<sup>96</sup> In fact, Ann Beer suggests that it parodies not just any "learned lecture" but Beckett's own. Beer shows that the talk cites phrases from Beckett's monograph on Proust almost verbatim and that he recasts them in the comic tone of *Le Concentrisme*. Thus, where in Beckett's *Proust*, "Swann is the cornerstone of the entire structure", in *Le Concentrisme* Jean du Chas declares in one of his "cahiers" that "Le concierge ... est la pierre angulaire de mon édifice entière." (Cf. Beer, "Beckett's Bilingualism" 211).



had started translating his story “Love and Lethe,” from *More Pricks than Kicks*, into French as well (*DTF* 676, note 160). At the same time, he continued writing prose in English.

Thus, not only did Beckett start learning French at a much younger age than is usually recognized, he also wrote his first French fiction while still living in Dublin, and started writing poetry in French almost immediately upon his settling permanently in Paris. In Paris Beckett also soon met and moved in with Suzanne Deschevaux-Demesnil, creating, as it were, a French home for himself as Suzanne spoke no English and showed little interest in learning the language. In this way, French became the language of his every day life, and Beckett gained an increasingly intimate relation to the language.

It is a pity that there are no recordings of Beckett speaking French because the reports on his fluency and accent are mixed and sometimes contradictory. Most people who knew Beckett in Paris were impressed with his French, which they reported as being “virtually accentless” (Cronin 440). But there are some dissenting accounts. Josette Hayden called Beckett’s French “deplorable” (*ibid*), and the writer Nathalie Sarraute, who sheltered Beckett and Suzanne for a few days while they were on the run from the Gestapo, goes even further and recalls: “Beckett had a very, very strong accent in French. Indeed, he did not speak French particularly well or write French well at that time” (Knowlson, *Beckett Remembering* 83). It is possible that Beckett had something of an accent in his French, and an accent often makes people judge someone’s fluency negatively, but it seems unlikely that Beckett did not speak French well at this time. In fact, it is probable that Sarraute’s personal dislike for Beckett colors her memory somewhat here. The interview in which she describes her recollections of the time

Beckett and Suzanne stayed with her and her family is very bitter. Sarraute admits that they “got on badly” (83) and accuses Beckett of being ungrateful and “badly brought up” (ibid) (which may well be true but has little to do with his fluency in French).<sup>97</sup>

During the war Beckett joined the French resistance. When his cell was betrayed he fled Paris with Suzanne and spent the last two years of the war in Roussillon, in the South of France. After the liberation of France and after finishing *Watt*, Beckett wrote his first “extended piece of prose fiction” in French, the short story “Suite,” later to be called “La Fin.” It had always been assumed that Beckett’s first postwar story was written exclusively in French, but Knowlson found the manuscript showing that Beckett started writing the story in English, wrote twenty-nine pages, then drew a line “a third way down the page and wrote the remainder of the story in French” (*DTF* 325). This is the line of demarcation, then, where Beckett started writing prose in French.

This would, in fact, become a stratagem that Beckett continued to use throughout his career: when stuck with writing in one language, he would start again in the other. Mark Nixon demonstrated this well at the Modern Language Association convention in Seattle in January of 2012. In his paper, entitled “Faux départs: The Textual Genesis of Beckett’s *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*,” Nixon showed how Beckett used a change in language to get things going when he was stuck with his story “Imagination morte imaginez” (“Imagination Dead Imagine”), which he started in English and then continued in French. Discussing his struggle with the story in

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<sup>97</sup> What is probably relevant too is the fact that Sarraute herself is of Russian descent and that she had, from a very young age, a complex relation to both languages, a consequence of her parents’ divorce. Claire Kramsch explains: “In *Enfance*, the French writer Nathalie Sarraute, of Russian origin, recounts the traumatic and endless train rides she used to make between her family in Russia and her family in France and her feelings of being torn between the two” (Kramsch 81).

an unpublished letter from January 30, 1965 to Lawrence Harvey, quoted by Nixon, Beckett wrote: “Started again in French again.”

The reasons for Beckett’s famous “switch” from writing in English to writing in French have been the subject of many decades of critical interpretation and speculation. It is frequently connected with the by now famous letter Beckett wrote from Dublin to his German acquaintance Axel Kaun on July 9, 1937. Although, as Cohn writes, it is indeed a for Beckett “unusually explicit” statement about language (Beckett, *Disjecta* 170), it goes perhaps too far to see it as a manifesto, as some critics have (cf. for instance Sinéad Mooney, who calls it a “Beckettian manifesto” (5)). It is a letter (in fact, it is the draft of a letter), later dismissed by Beckett to Cohn as “German bilge,”<sup>98</sup> and not a linguistic mission statement.

It does, however, throw interesting light on Beckett’s bilingualism. In this letter, Beckett claims he would like to eliminate language, or, failing that, would at least like to contribute to its falling into disrepute:

Es wird mir tatsächlich immer schwieriger, ja sinnloser, ein offizielles Englisch zu schreiben. Und immer mehr wie ein Schleier kommt mir meine Sprache vor, den man zerreißen muss, um an die dahinterliegenden Dinge (oder das dahinterliegende Nichts) zu kommen. Grammatik und Stil. Mir scheinen sie ebenso hinfällig geworden zu sein wie ein Biedermeier Badeanzug oder die Unerschütterlichkeit [sic] eines Gentlemans. Eine Larve. Hoffentlich kommt die Zeit, sie ist ja Gott sei Dank in gewissen Kreisen schon da, wo die Sprache da am besten gebraucht wird, wo sie am tüchtigsten missbraucht wird. Da wir sie so mit einem Male nicht ausschalten können, wollen wir wenigstens nichts versäumen, was zu ihrem Verruf beitragen mag. Ein Loch nach dem andern in ihr zu bohren, bis das Dahinterkauernde, sei es etwas oder nichts, durchzusickern anfängt – ich kann mir für den heutigen Schriftsteller kein höheres Ziel vorstellen (*Disjecta* 52). (It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and Style. To me they

<sup>98</sup> Cf. *Disjecta* 170, and Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* 88. Cohn comments, justly, that “[a]lmost every critic has cited this letter in connection with Beckett’s postwar writing” (*A Beckett Canon* 89).

seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. It is to be hoped the time will come, thank God, in some circles already has, when language is most efficiently used where it is most efficiently misused. Since we cannot dismiss it all at once, at least we do not want to leave anything undone that may contribute to its disrepute. To bore one hole after another into it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today (*Disjecta* 172)).

The concept of boring holes in language is interesting in light of Beckett's bilingualism, inasmuch as bilingualism can expose "holes" in language. Words and concepts from one language "do not neatly map onto" the words and concepts from another language (Pavlenko, *Emotions and Multilingualism* 77), thus exposing gaps in language – gaps that were not evident before, and are not evident to monolingual speakers of the languages.

As one subject in a recent study on emotion terms and multilingualism remarked, a Greek-English bilingual:

'Frustration' is such an amazing word, the lack of it in a language is so amazing because it carries with it the word 'frustrate' to stop to block ... so the outside force is carried in that word, it's not just what you feel it's the way you feel because an outside force is blocking you and you don't have that in Greek (ibid).

The discovery of such lexical gaps, "lacks" or "holes" in language inevitably leads to a more tangible awareness of the arbitrariness and inadequacy of language, something that Beckett will increasingly exploit in his fiction.

The comments Beckett himself made regarding his decision to start writing in French are sporadic, contradictory, and oblique ("I just felt like it," for example)<sup>99</sup> and

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<sup>99</sup> Fletcher 213.

Some other reasons Beckett gave for his "switch:" to an American journalist Beckett said in 1956, "[it] was a different experience from writing in English. It was more exciting for me, writing in French" (Forster, 87); in answer to a Swiss critic Beckett said, "Parce qu'en français c'est plus facile d'écrire sans style" (ibid.). Elsewhere Beckett explained that French provided him with "the right weakening effect" (Cohn 95),

have not been much help in shedding light on his move to French. That he never talked about his own bilingualism, or only briefly, would indicate that his motivation might not have been clear even to him. It is here that some of the insights of linguistics could be enlightening.

### **Je suis un bonne poire: French vs. English**

In chapter one we saw that cross-linguistic studies of bilingualism and multilingualism have shown considerable cognitive advantages to bilingualism. Bilingualism seems to promote metalinguistic awareness, and other “aspects of cognitive performance may then benefit from this increased level of metalinguistic awareness in bilinguals, either indirectly through superior linguistic abilities, or directly, for instance because attention to structure is beneficial for cognitive functioning in general” (de Groot 390). I will discuss these cognitive advantages in more detail later in this chapter. First, I will explore some of the pitfalls of bilingualism, as these too are very interesting for Beckett’s situation.

In chapter one I described that neuro- and psycholinguistic research has demonstrated that the neural substrate involved in language changes throughout a person’s lifetime. The various languages in the multilingual language system all interact, and the overall language system is in ongoing flux. This means that the cerebral organization for language changes depending on how much languages are used, causing

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and with the ability to “impoverish” himself: “À la Libération, je pus conserver mon appartement, j’y revins, et me remis à écrire – en français – avec le désir de m’appauvrir encore davantage. C’était ça, le vrai mobile”; or, as he also said, in deliberately broken French (“pidgin bullskrit”), he wrote in French “Pour faire remarquer moi” (Cohn 58). All these “mobiles” probably contain some (or much) truth, yet none tell the whole story.

languages to grow more or less accessible to the speaker – to such a degree that even a first, or native language can become inaccessible if it is gradually being replaced by a second language. It might be thought that one’s first language enjoys a privileged status and is therefore immune to forgetting, but this is not the case: “the active use of more than one language affects the processing of all of the languages concerned, including the L1 [or native language]” (de Groot 361). As we saw in chapter one, the first language is “as susceptible to loss (or inaccessibility) as” a second language (353): “true bilingualism or multilingualism, in which the different translation equivalent words for one and the same concept all remain accessible, requires that all languages, including the L1, are maintained permanently. If an earlier language is neglected it will be overwritten or suppressed over time by the new language” (356).

Emine Sevgi Özdamar, a German writer of Turkish origin, plays with this concept of first language attrition in her short story “Mutterzunge” (the title story of the (somewhat auto-biographical) collection that bears the same name), which centers around the idea of losing one’s “Mother tongue.” The title of the tale already indicates bilingual tension: the word “Mutterzunge” does not exist in German, in German “mother tongue” is “Muttersprache.” “Mutterzunge” is a literal translation from the Turkish word “anadil” (“ana” meaning mother, and “dil” tongue). As the narrator puts it: “In meiner Sprache heißt Zunge: Sprache” (9). “In my language, ‘tongue’ means ‘language’” (9).<sup>100</sup> And in the story, the narrator tries to discover at which point exactly she lost her mother tongue, hoping that this discovery might then lead her to get it back: “Wenn ich nur wüsste, wann ich meine Mutterzunge verloren habe” (9). “If only I knew when I lost my mother

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<sup>100</sup> This is the case not just in Turkish but in many languages. For instance, French “langue,” Italian “lingua,” Spanish “lengua,” Irish “teanga,” and Russian “язык” all mean both “language” and “tongue.”

tongue” (9), a sentence that keeps recurring, in different variations, throughout the short story: “Wenn ich nur wüsste, in welchem Moment ich meine Mutterzunge verloren habe” (11), “If I only knew exactly when I lost my mother tongue” (11-12). Thus, Özdamar gives an acute form to the gradual and painful loss of her mother tongue, made extra painful because she is a writer.

De Groot proposes that the forgetting of the first language is “directly related to second language acquisition or, more generally, that any change in the language system as a whole affects the rest of the system” (353). This is because “the acquisition of a translation equivalent of a word known before has the effect of rendering the earlier word for the same concept less available, up to the point that it cannot be retrieved again when it is not re-used once in a while” (354). Thus languages can block each other, a second language can, as it were, prevent access to the first language, and this has consequences for a bilingual writer. The Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman, who writes both in Spanish and in English, has commented on the struggle between his two languages as he tried to start writing his memoir *Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey*: “But no sooner did I start to write the first sentences of that autobiography in one of the languages, say English, than the Spanish misbehaved abominably, blocked those words as if they were alien, an in flagrante case of linguistic adultery” (207).

The research of the linguist Aneta Pavlenko draws the same conclusions as Annette de Groot, in her study of “Second Language Learning by Adults”: “Not surprisingly, this intense process of second language learning is often accompanied by gradual attrition of the native language” (9). She gives the example of, among others, Jan Novak, a bilingual and an American writer of Czech origin, who wrote: “... my Czech

had begun to deteriorate. There were times now when I could not recall an everyday word, such as ‘carrot,’ ‘filer,’ or ‘sloth.’ I would waste the day probing the labyrinthine recesses of my memory because to get help from the dictionary seemed only to legitimize the loss...” (ibid).

The aforementioned Polish-Canadian writer Eva Hoffman recounts a similar experience. After moving from her native Krakow to Vancouver in her early teens, she found that English slowly replaced Polish as her dominant language. In her memoir *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language*, she wrote: “Polish, in a short time, has atrophied, shriveled from sheer uselessness” (107). Her personal experience echoes de Groot’s finding that the active use of a second language affects the processing of the first language. “When I speak Polish now,” Hoffman writes, “it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it” (273). Hoffman tries to capture in words a neurological process for which she has no vocabulary, and yet her description is apt.

In Beckett’s case, it is likely that French was becoming stronger and thus more dominant during the two years he spent in Roussillon. These years were a determining time in Beckett’s linguistic development. First of all, Beckett’s prolonged stay in the countryside gave him access to a somewhat different French from the one he had known before. Dan Gunn, one of the co-editors of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*,<sup>101</sup> has observed: “During the War years Beckett is immersed in a France, and a French, that is very different from the world of Paris intellectuals he knew” (“A Q&A with Dan Gunn”). Working for a family of local tenant farmers, the Audes, in order to obtain food for

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<sup>101</sup> Two volumes of the letters have appeared at this point (*Volume I: 1929-1940*, and *Volume II: 1941-1956*) and two more volumes are scheduled to come out in the future. Further references to the letters will be cited parenthetically in the text as *BLL I* and *BLL II*.



himself and Suzanne, Beckett greatly increased his range of French, acquiring agricultural expressions and country proverbs.<sup>102</sup>

More importantly, Beckett spoke French almost exclusively during this period, since Suzanne knew no English and the local people they befriended did not either. Thus, French quickly became the language of his every day life and gradually started to compete with English as Beckett's dominant language. The manuscript of his last English language novel, *Watt*, illustrates that this was the case. Beckett had started writing *Watt* in Paris, before the war, and continued it in Roussillon – as he said himself, to ward off boredom. Ann Beer's examination of the manuscript of *Watt*, in her excellent 1985 article "'Watt', Knott and Beckett's Bilingualism" in the *Journal of Beckett Studies*, argues that by the later stages of the novel, Beckett had started thinking in French about his own English writing. As we will see below, she points to a number of instances where, next to the English text, we find marginal comments and instructions in French and concludes that "the Ms bears witness to the growing dominance of French in Beckett's mind" (50-51).

After studying the *Watt* manuscript myself I have come to believe that the instances where Beckett can be seen "thinking" in French are not so much evidence of shifting dominance, in the sense that French more and more replaced English as the dominant language in his mind, than of *competing* dominance, where the two languages exist increasingly side by side in Beckett's brain. French might more and more have been

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<sup>102</sup> On page 190 of *Watt* notebook 3, Beckett writes, for instance, "Et les caisses se touchent dans la vigne (Aude – Sept. 29, 1943)" ("And the crates are touching in the vines"). Knowlson comments: "This sentence, which sounds like a secret radio message intended for the ears of members of the Resistance, was actually used as an expression of misfortune by M. Aude, his son explained, when the ground was too sodden for the crates full of grapes to be dragged out from the vines by horse and sledge; they then had to be manhandled, 'with the help of Sam'" (*DTF* 296). His noting down of this phrase shows Beckett's interest in recording – and remembering – these types of sayings.

becoming the language of his every day life, and more and more the language in which he starts to think, but the writing of *Watt*, in English, kept English actively present as well. This is borne out by the manuscript, where notes to himself in French and in English alternate.

In fact, it is interesting to see how gradual the process is in which French becomes progressively present in his mind. In the first notebook, “Begun evening of Tuesday 11/2/41” as Beckett has written on the first page, there seem to be no notes in French at all.<sup>103</sup> Notebook two, also written while Beckett was still in Paris, features the draft of a short letter in French (Ms. A2, 2)<sup>104</sup> and a doodle of a man with a dog, gazing lustfully at a woman’s behind, with “Pitié pour l’aveugle” written underneath (Ms. A2, 26). From notebook three onwards, written partly in Paris, partly while Beckett and Suzanne were fleeing from the Gestapo and partly in Roussillon, the French increases and we occasionally find Beckett, as it were, talking to himself in French. In notebook three, for example, the arrival of Watt is indicated by the words “Watterise selon p. 81,” (Ms. 3, 67) and in notebook four, written entirely in Roussillon, we find little prompts or directions to himself in French: “A insérer p. –44” (Ms. 4, 127) and “K – à insérer p. 46” (Ms. 4, 127). Similarly, on the cover of notebook five, written when Beckett was back in Paris, he wrote: “Watt, Suite [et Fin]. 18.2.45. Et début de l’Absent → Malone Meurt. Novembre – Janvier 47/48” (Ms. 5, cover) – a nice contrast with the first notebook, the start of which, as we saw, Beckett still announced in English.

However, instructions and reminders in English continue as well. In notebook three, Beckett wrote “Insert 83. A” (Ms. 3, 170); in notebook four he announces that

<sup>103</sup> There is however a short quote in Italian from Dante’s *Inferno*, Canto 1: “tu se’ il mio maestro e il mio autore” (Ms. A1, 56). (Which should be: “tu se lo mio maestro e ‘l mio autore”)

<sup>104</sup> I refer to the notebooks as Ms., followed by the notebook number and page number.

“Watt tells 4 before 3” (Ms. 4, 139); about half way through notebook five, he writes “End of ? of Watt continued in notebook VI” (Ms. 5, 99); and on the next page we find “Beginning of Malone Meurt, originally entitled L’Absent” (Ms. 5, 100). Similarly, towards the end of notebook five and after many pages written of the draft of the French *Malone Meurt*, we find in English: “End of I part of Malone Meurt continued in separate notebook. S.B.” (Ms. 5, 180), and a few pages after that there are some notes for *Watt*, all written in English (for instance, “Insert that Arsene’s declaration came back little by little to Watt” (Ms. 5, 182).

Thus, although French did become ever more present in Beckett’s mind, it did not take the place of English. Rather, the two began increasingly to exist side by side, and continued to do so, competing for dominance in Beckett’s writing and his thinking.<sup>105</sup> This is probably as much a reason for Beckett’s starting to write in French after the war as the reasons he gave himself, or the reasons literary critics have pointed out so far. The manuscript of *Watt* seems to support this, and so do the two volumes of Beckett’s recently published letters.

In these letters, occasional small mistakes gradually start slipping into his English – for example, sometimes he wrote “half” for “have” (*BLL I* 657), or “sea” for “see”, or he wrote “Shall of course send you ... whatever else what you want” (*BLL II* 376). At

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<sup>105</sup> This thinking in both languages, sometimes in the one, other times in the other, is a common feature in bilinguals. François Grosjean reports that most bilinguals will think, and talk to themselves, in both their languages, depending on the situation, and can even alternate languages in the same “thought,” or utterance to themselves. He gives the example of a German-English bilingual living in Canada, who describes “having heard herself say, as she was preparing a meal: ‘Salad...mit einem Ei...why not?’ When looking at houses for sale in the newspaper, she said to herself: ‘Hundertneunundzwanzig tausend Dollar – for a three bedroom bungalow?’” (*Life with Two Languages*, 276). Derek Walcott has written: “I think the ultimate question to a writer is: ‘What language do you think in?’ I think in English; I do not think in French Creole. I imagine if I had a dream, the conversation that I would dream in would be in English, unless the dream was particularly about a certain thing. So if I think in English, my instinct is to write in English because that is the language of my thoughts.” Yet people, and writers, in a bilingual situation will not always think in just one language, or the language in which they think might shift, back and forth, and so the question of which language to write in is not always as clear-cut as Walcott puts it.

times English appears overwritten by French – when he writes “consider” as “considerer”, from the French “considérer” (*BLL II* 403) or when he uses “sympathetic” in the French sense of meaning “kind” or “friendly”, not a mistake necessarily, but also not exactly idiomatic English (*BLL I* 630). At the same time, there are small slips in the French as well. For instance, he writes “d’une” for “une,” “au” for “aux” (*BLL I* 177, 179), “coincide” for “coïncide,” “ballader” for “balader,” “diffusée” for “diffusé” (*BLL II* 684) et cetera. And in a short postcard to George Reavey, in which Beckett corrects Reavey’s French (“The verb is S’EMMERDER”) he makes a mistake himself when he writes “Pardit” for “Pardi” (*BLL I* 344).

The letters also are filled with instances of code-switching – as we saw in chapter one, code-switching is the seemingly arbitrary alternation of two (or more) languages within the same conversation, or even within a single sentence. In the letters written in English, words, expressions and whole sentences are included in French. He writes for instance, “I’m very sorry to hear that you are laid up again: at the Corneille, n’est-ce pas?”; “I think S. O’S en profite, from what I am told” (*BLL I* 61); “Won’t you keep me au courant” (*BLL I* 69); “Pelorson s’éloigne, toujours très pris, très mélancolique, mal aux yeux, au Coeur, aux bronches, hallucinations, rêves, seuil de la folie & the usual” (*BLL I* 73); “All very deliberately agreeable & faute de mieux” (*BLL I* 154); “I have had no news of my démarche” (*BLL I* 669); “Je suis une bonne poire” (*BLL II* 72); “I am returning to France as (tenez-vous bien) interpreter-storekeeper to the Irish Red Cross Hospital Unit in Normandy” (*BLL II* 15); “Geer has les yeux qui foirent dans la sciure, something wrong with the tear ducts” (*BLL II* 376); “Remember me kindly to your wife. Mais oui, sans faute, à un de ces jours” (*BLL II* 427); “A la rigueur, if you wish” (*BLL II* 431);

“Article on Yeats. J’y laisserai la peau et les os. Ce sera toujours ça” (*BLL II* 444); “I am writing to Combat to-day to abonner you” (*BLL II* 531); “he asked me to be his témoin” (*BLL II* 555); “Will you explain if you see him and lui faire mes amities” (*BLL II* 661). Towards the end of volume two of the letters, Beckett also start addressing his friends in French, so we read, for instance: “Bien chère Nancy” (611); “Cher vieux Barney” (620); Bien cher Tom (623); “Bien chers Con & Ethna” (661).

These examples of code-switching in Beckett’s letters (and there are many, many more – to find a letter without French would be almost as challenging a puzzle as the one Bloom suggests in “Calypso”: “Good puzzle would be cross Dublin without passing a pub” (*U* 4.129-130)) illustrate the increased presence of French in Beckett’s mind and the ease with which he moves between them. Long regarded as something negative, an indication of a bilingual’s laziness, incompetence, or both,<sup>106</sup> code-switching is now generally regarded first, as an inevitable consequence bilingualism, and second as a sign of fluency – research has shown that only fluent bilinguals will engage in code-switching.<sup>107</sup> Penelope Gardner-Chloros, in her groundbreaking study *Code-switching* (2009), explains that “[m]uch research has now shown that bilinguals can never totally ‘switch off’ one of their languages” (120).

De Groot detects something similar: “when bilinguals are conversing with their interlocutors in one of their languages the mental system that stores the other language is not completely at rest.” She describes “a bilingual linguistic system that is noisier than

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<sup>106</sup> François Grosjean explains: “Monolinguals have long had a very negative attitude toward code-switching, which they see as grammarless mixture of two languages, a jargon or gibberish that is an insult to the monolingual’s own rule-governed language [...] this negative attitude toward code-switching has been adopted, at least overtly, by many bilinguals,” who see it as “done mostly out of laziness,” “embarrassing,” “dangerous,” or “not very pure” (*Life with Two Languages* 146-147).

<sup>107</sup> Cf. for instance Shana Poplack’s article “Sometimes I’ll start a sentence in Spanish Y TERMINO EN ESPAÑOL: Toward a Typology of Code-switching”.

the language system of monolingual language users because, during both language comprehension and language production, linguistic elements of both linguistic subsystems are activated,” resulting in an “extra fierce mental rivalry” (279). As a consequence, code-switching “affects practically everyone who is in contact with more than one language or dialect” (Gardner Chloros 4). Gardner-Chloros cites R. Tracy, who considered, “from a psycholinguist’s point of view, that the coactivation of dual systems represented by CS [code-switching] was nothing unusual in itself, and that an aspect of bilingual ability was being able to suspend the requirements of monolingual grammars.” (169).

In sum, I take the examples of code-switching in Beckett’s letters as a sign of his complete command of French.

It is clear that Beckett enjoyed this switching between languages, the crossing of linguistic borders, and the letters show an increasing willingness to play with language and create multilingual puns – often by means of literal translations between English and French. “Tant pis,” which Beckett uses a lot, becomes “so much piss” (*BLL I* 124), and “au courant,” which he uses a lot too, becomes “Keep me in the current” (*BLL I* 73). To the recently married Con and Ethna Leventhal he writes, “hope to hear soon you have hung the pot-hanger with all due solemnity and jollity” (*BLL II* 661), giving a literal translation of the French “prendre la crémaillère,” or “to arrange house warming party.” George Craig gives two nice examples of this. In a letter to Thomas McGreevy, Beckett writes “fucking the field,”<sup>108</sup> “where he brings to life a dead French metaphor – the long familiar colloquialism ‘foutre le camp’ even then meant little more than ‘to leave

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<sup>108</sup> This letter is not included in full in the published volumes, but quoted by George Craig in the “French Translator’s Preface” to *BLL I* xl.

suddenly,’ ‘to get away’ – in a deliberately grotesque English version” (*BLL I* xl).

Similarly, to Georges Duthuit (“Mon cher vieux George”) Beckett writes: “Assez de ce vous garou, veux-tu?” (*BLL II* 126) Craig explains:

A literal rendering is impossible: this invented piece of French takes off from a familiar word, ‘loup-garou’ (werewolf; the ‘bugbear’ of stories told to children). As Beckett senses an increasing closeness to Duthuit, he makes a verbal move toward making it: a change from the earlier, formal ‘vous’ to the intimate ‘tu’ ... However, rather than simply making the change, Beckett proposes it by way of this extraordinary formula, banishing as it were for ever the ‘big bad ‘vous,’” and hoping for Duthuit’s favorable reaction (*BLL I* xxxvi).

Showing, once again, his increased ease with French.

There are two other interesting things that these first two volumes of Beckett’s letters show. First of all, code-switching happens only in the English letters. The French letters remain “pure,” devoid of English interference. This is perhaps because, as a foreigner writing in French, Beckett felt compelled to show his fluency and was afraid that using English would be seen as a sign of diminished competence (as it probably would be – not just because the French are rather particular about their language, but because, as we saw above, code-switching is often regarded negatively by monolinguals and bilinguals alike). It might be a sign, not of diminished competence, but of Beckett’s being less at home in French. He was completely fluent in French and the language was firmly ensconced in his mind, but he did not yet feel comfortable enough to play with it in the same way he did in English. There is, of course, a good chance that in the later letters, as Beckett’s reputation as a French writer grows, he will feel less bound by the boundaries of French and that here we will find him engaged in code-switching in French letters too, but we will have to wait and see.

Secondly, the code-switching happens almost only in letters to good friends, people like Thomas MacGreevy, George Reavey, Pamela Mitchell, Con Leventhal and others, to whom he feels close and with whom he can turn off, as it were, his inner censor. This is also illustrated by the fact that in letters to such friends his language in general becomes more playful and relaxed, as exemplified by the fact that he uses more abbreviations for instance (just some examples: to Thomas MacGreevy, “taking it as easy as poss” (*BLL I* 594) and “she is anxious to get in touch with you at earliest op” (*BLL I* 580), or to George Reavey, “Ne demande pas mieux but shn’t have the price” and “don’t know what effect it wd. have on my lit. situation in England” (*BLL I* 604). It is in (English) letters to intimate friends that code-switching occurs most frequently. This shows, I think, that the code-switching in English is something that comes natural, that it is, or has become, his natural way of thinking, speaking and writing. (And in fact, Knowlson reports that in conversations too Beckett would glide easily between English and French (*DTF* 427).) It seems as though Beckett has to make a conscious effort, when writing in English, to “switch off” his French when he feels it would be inappropriate to play too much on the boundaries between the two languages.

In short, the letters corroborate what the *Watt* manuscript shows as well: French is securely established in his brain, increasingly competing for dominance with his English, yet it did not take the place of English. This might have been an important motive for Beckett’s decision to start composing fiction in French after the war, inasmuch as it might have just become easier to write in French than in English – or in any case,



less easy to write in English than it was before. As Beckett writes in a letter to Cyril Lucas, “my English is getting rusty.”<sup>109</sup>

### **Quel est le mot: Beckett’s Tip-of-the-Tongue Phenomenon**

The competing dominance between Beckett’s English and French might shed some light on his practice of self-translation. Almost everything Beckett wrote in English he immediately, or eventually, translated into French and vice versa. Many critics have wondered why Beckett “bound himself to the servitude of writing each of his works twice” (Klosty Beaujour 174), especially since from his letters it appears that he absolutely loathed doing these self-translations. By translating many of his works in the other language, by continuously moving back and forth between French and English and combining his efforts between the two languages he ensures as it were maximum frustration.

Describing the difference between his own work and that of James Joyce, who, as we saw in the previous chapter, had told him years earlier: “I have discovered I can do anything with language I want” (Ellmann 661-662),<sup>110</sup> Beckett observed to a *New York Times* critic in 1966:

The kind of work I do is one in which I’m not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could do. He’s tending toward omniscience and

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<sup>109</sup> This letter is not included in full in the published volumes, but quoted by George Craig in the “French Translator’s Preface” to *BLL II* xxxv.

<sup>110</sup> This remark by Joyce calls to mind Humpty Dumpty who, in chapter six of *Through the Looking Glass*, rebukes Alice, after she objects to his making up new meanings for words (“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument’”): “‘When *I* use a word’ Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’ ‘The Question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make a word mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all’ Alice was too much puzzled to say anything, so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. ‘They’ve a temper, some of them – particularly verbs: they’re the proudest – adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs – however, *I* can manage the whole lot of them. Impenetrability! That’s what *I* say!’” (Carroll 123-124)

omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past (Graver and Federman 148).

Few things can guarantee feelings of impotence as surely as moving back and forth between two languages. Of course, all writers accept the struggle with language, it is "a given of their trade", as Klosty Beaujour puts it (40), yet this struggle becomes considerably more intense when there are two, or more, languages among which to search for the right word.

As we saw in chapter one, recent psycholinguistic studies have shown that bilinguals suffer more often than monolinguals from what is known as the "tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon." The linguist Peter Ecke explains that the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon is a "very peculiar kind of slowed down and interrupted word retrieval" in which "semantic and syntactic information of the desired word has been specified, but phonological encoding fails or is realized only in part" (185). Ecke describes that this is not due to a general processing deficit in bilinguals compared to monolinguals. Rather, it reflects an increase in processing complexity for concepts that can be mapped on two or more phonological forms in the bilingual lexicon. The data from research of tip-of-the-tongue phenomena suggest "that bilinguals are disadvantaged in lexical retrieval simply because they use words specific to each language less frequently than monolinguals" (Ecke 195). They use individual word forms less often than monolinguals use them in their single language and this "reduced frequency of individual word use results in relatively weak form-meaning connections that can become susceptible to incomplete lexical activation" (Ecke 203). De Groot explains: "having two words for one and the

same concept and using both implies that bilinguals use each single word less often than monolinguals do. As a consequence it has been less well learned” (de Groot 389).

I think of it in this way: If you were to cut a path through a dense wood and frequently walked across it, back and forth, the path would remain open and easily traversable. But if you were to cut two paths, and sometimes you would walk on the one path, and other times you would walk on the other, both would become slightly less open and unobstructed. They would both still be navigable, and it is of course a great advantage to have two paths at one’s disposal instead of just one, but occasionally you might run into minor obstacles, like overgrowing branches and protruding roots.

Things work similarly in the case of our cerebral organization for language. The “abstractions we describe as ‘languages’” (Matthews 115) consist in fact of a complex linkage of brain centers through direct and indirect nerve connections and neural pathways. In a bilingual brain, more neural pathways are set up, because for each concept there will usually be at least two words. But those individual pathways will be used less often, because sometimes you will use the pathway to the word in, say, French, and other times the one to the word in English.

This has evident interest for understanding Beckett. Through his self-translations, Beckett kept toggling between both his languages in his mind, ensuring that he continued to actively use both French and English. As we have seen, the active use of two languages affects the processing of all languages concerned. To quote again the words of the neurolinguist Ellen Bialystok, “if you have two languages and you use them regularly, the way the brain’s networks function is that every time you speak, both languages pop up and the executive control system has to sort through everything and

attend to what's relevant in the moment" ("A Conversation" D2). In general this is an advantage. Since, as we saw, bilinguals use this executive control system more it becomes more efficient, creating a cognitive system with "an increased ability to attend to important information and ignore the less important" (ibid). For a writer, however, this might present difficulties making the search for "le mot juste" utterly frustrating.

The struggle for the right word became one of the determining symbols of Beckett's work and this is beautifully expressed in his poem "Comment Dire", or "What is the Word", the last thing he wrote before his death. This poem centers around the phrase "comment dire" and seems almost a poetic rendition of the "tip of the tongue phenomenon"—in fact, Ruby Cohn has shown that in an earlier draft the search for words is rendered as "quel est le mot" (*Beckett Canon* 383), literally "what is the word." Through dashes, repetitions and elisions Beckett represents and explores the frustrating bilingual search for the right word. The poem starts like this:

folie-  
folie que de-  
que de-  
comment dire-  
folie que de ce-  
depuis-  
folie depuis ce-  
donné-  
folie donné de que de-  
...  
comment dire-

And it ends like this:

comment dire-  
vu tout ceci-  
tout ce ceci-ci-  
folie que de voir quoi-  
entrevoir-  
...

folie que d'y vouloir croire entrevoir quoi-  
 quoi-  
 comment dire-

comment dire (*Poems* 112-114)

In Beckett's English translation this becomes:

folly -  
 folly for to -  
 for to -  
 what is the word -  
 folly from this-  
 all this-  
 folly from all this-  
 given-  
 folly given all this-  
 ...  
 what is the word-

what is the word -  
 seeing all this -  
 all this this -  
 all this this here -  
 folly for to see what -  
 glimpse -

...  
 folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there what -  
 what -  
 what is the word -

what is the word (*Poems* 113-115)

### ***Watt* Between English and French**

What this poem underscores, together with the *Watt* manuscript and the published letters, is that the tensions, interactions and cross-fertilizations between Beckett's English and his French governs the very substance of his work. Beckett's bilingualism, the competing dominance between his languages, is an important "key" to his writing. From the time of his flight to Rousillon in 1942, where his knowledge of French was consolidated and the

bilingual tension was at its highest, all Beckett's works are in a sense fuelled by the creative tension caused by his bilingualism. What is more, from this time onwards language increasingly becomes the topic of Beckett's writing, rather than just the medium through which he writes. Ann Beer writes: "In *Watt* Beckett begins to examine and externalize a language which is gradually shifting from its status as a mother-tongue, habitual and instinctive, to that of a language whose relative and arbitrary nature is clear, and whose structures and assumptions are becoming exposed as he lives more fully in a different human speech" (Beer, "'Watt,' Knott" 37).

Klosty Beaujour too has pointed to an increased sense of linguistic consciousness in Beckett as a consequence of his bilingualism. She observes that "the capacity to separate names from things, which becomes an affliction and a torture to certain Beckett characters, is one of the primary psycho-physiological characteristics of genuine bilinguals" (169) – an observation that is echoed by Eva Hoffman, who, describing her "shift" into English, writes: "the problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified" (106). Similarly, Mooney connects Beckett's bilingualism with his "polyglot knowledge of the arbitrariness of the signifier" (75). And Jeremy Hawthorne detects a comparable occurrence in Conrad, whose style is informed by "a more than commonly developed consciousness of language [...] an awakened philosophical curiosity about language, more easily developed when one speaks and thinks in more than one tongue" (quoted in Pousada 13).

This increased linguistic consciousness is not something unique to multilingual writers, but, as we saw in chapter one, it is an intrinsic aspect of bilingualism.<sup>111</sup> Cross-linguistic studies have shown that bilingualism enhances metalinguistic awareness, “that is, the ability ‘to reflect on and manipulate the structural features of language independent of meaning,’ ‘to look *at* a language rather than *through* it to the intended meaning,’ or to think about language rather than to think through language” (De Groot 390). Or, as Gardner Chloros puts it, bilinguals have “meta-skills” with regard to grammar (169). This is probably because the “dual linguistic environment” of bilinguals “forces them to pay special attention to the structural aspects of language” (ibid). Bilingualism “boosts word awareness and, particularly, the awareness that a word’s form and its meaning are not inseparable entities but have become associated merely through convention” (de Groot 390).<sup>112</sup>

Bilinguals are aware “that the relation between a word’s sound and meaning is arbitrary, that a particular thing (or living being or abstract concept) remains this very same thing if its name were to be changed into a completely different one (de Groot 390). As a consequence, it is easier for bilinguals to “ignore the conventional meanings of words” (de Groot 392). The linguist S.J. Evans even suggests that the separation of sound and meaning is a liberating achievement: “it frees the mind from the tyranny of words. It is extremely difficult for a monoglot to dissociate thought from words, but he who can express his ideas in two languages is emancipated” (quoted in de Groot 293).

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<sup>111</sup> It is important to remember here that, as we also saw in chapter one, in today’s world most people are in fact bilingual, yet general linguistics still treats bilingualism as the exception and monolingualism as the norm.

<sup>112</sup> De Groot is basing herself here on two early studies by Ben-Zeev, from 1977, and Ianco-Worrall, from 1972.

In short, metalinguistic awareness is a common consequence of bilingualism and second language acquisition, and in Beckett this can be clearly viewed in his works: from *Watt* onwards, his works are not just related *through* language, they are *about* language. In his essay “Beckett’s English,” Richard Coe writes that the “objective of *Watt* is to use language as if there were no relation between word and concept, signifier and signified” (50). In reality, of course, there *is* no relation between word and concept, something Beckett has discovered through his increased fluency in French, and something that Watt too discovers in the course of the novel. Gradually, Watt realizes that the objects that surround him, “if they consented to be named, did so with reluctance” (81). Upon this discovery follows a lengthy passage in which Watt applies this realization to the word “pot.” I quote the passage at length:

Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot, at one of Mr. Knott’s pots, it was in vain that Watt said, Pot, pot. Well, perhaps not quite in vain, but very nearly. For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all. It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot, and be comforted. It was in vain that it answered, with unexceptionable adequacy, all the purposes, and performed all the offices, of a pot, it was not a pot. And it was thus this hairsbreadth departure from the nature of a true pot that so excruciated Watt. For if the approximation had been less close, then Watt would have been less anguished. For then he would not have said, This is a pot, and yet not a pot, no, but then he would have said, This is something of which I do not know the name. And Watt preferred on the whole having to do with things of which he did not know the name, though this too was painful to Watt, to having to do with things of which the known name, the proven name, was not the name, any more, for him. For he could always hope, of a thing of which he had never known the name, that he would learn the name, some day, and so be tranquillized. But he could not look forward to this in the case of a thing of which the true name had ceased, suddenly, or gradually, to be the true name for Watt. For the pot remained a pot, Watt felt sure of that, for everyone but Watt. For Watt alone it was not a pot, any more (81-82).



Where for a monoglot language is natural and uncomplicated, for Watt language has lost its naturalness and showed itself to be complicated, elusive. Language has revealed its arbitrary character:

And Watt's need of semantic succour was at times so great that he would set to trying names on things, and on himself, almost as a woman hats. Thus of the pseudo-pot he would say, after reflexion, It is a shield, or, growing bolder, It is a raven, and so on. But the pot proved as little a shield, or a raven, or any other of the things that Watt called it, as a pot (83).

Watt longs to hear Erskine's voice, "wrapping up safe in words the kitchen space" (83), because for him the world can no longer be safely wrapped up in words.

Watt's discovery causes him to start questioning all aspects of language and this results in an increased attention to the sound of language, to pronunciation.<sup>113</sup> It is, for instance, mainly because of his "way of speaking" that Watt likes Mr Graves: "Mr Graves pronounced his *th* charmingly. Turd and fart, he said, for third and fourth. Watt liked these venerable saxon words" (143). Watt also likes old Tom's way of saying, "Why was me three boys took, and me with my gripes left?" (109) And it is with a linguist's precision that Watt, who is in fact, we learn, "a very fair linguist," describes Mr Knott's speech: "The open a sound was predominant, and the explosives k and g" (208). "Explosives" is a play on plosives, but it fits the "vehemence of intonation" that accompanies Knott's way of speaking (208). And although Watt is not particularly interested in Mick's account of his own life (Watt only picks up fragments, "He said further, At the age of fifteen, My beloved wife, My beloved dog, Till at last." (216)), he pays close attention to the voice that narrates it, which was "far from unmelodious": "The fricatives in particular were pleasing" (216).

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<sup>113</sup> In a letter to Alan Schneider, Beckett describes his work as "a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible" (*Disjecta* 109).

This attention to sound, to ways of speech, to pronunciation, pervades *Watt*, and results in a frequent questioning of the logics of both elocution and orthography. Tetty, for instance, has difficulties with the pronunciation of the word “womb,” which she pronounces as “my wom.” “Your what? said Mr Hackett. My wom, said Tetty. You know, said Goff, her woom.” (13). Similarly, Arsene pronounces “have” as “haf” (44); Mr Nackybal says “sivinty-thray” for “seventy-three” (186); and the Galls, “father and son,” have come “to choon the piano” (70). This focus on pronunciation draws attention to the arbitrariness and illogicality of English orthography, where nothing is “spelt as pronounced” (170) (illustrated also by the rendition of “when ten o’clock struck” as “when ten o’cluck strock” (96)). Maybe that is also why Watt himself speaks “with scarce regard for grammar, for syntax, for pronunciation, for enunciation, and very likely, if the truth were known, for spelling too, as these were generally received” (156). Of course, the names of Watt and Knott themselves are already a play on pronunciation, and thus the very title of the novel foreshadows this aspect of the book.

Watt’s metalinguistic realization of the arbitrariness of language, pronunciation and spelling eventually causes a breakdown in his ability to produce speech. After Watt’s distressing discovery that for him a pot can be no longer be a pot, the narrator announces that, nonetheless, at this point “Watt’s words had not yet begun to fail him, or Watt’s world to become unspeakable” (85), but implying that this occurrence is imminent. And indeed, it starts about two-thirds through the novel, and greatly pains the narrator:

Why, Watt, I cried, that is a nice state you have got yourself into, to be sure. Not it is, yes, replied Watt. This short phrase caused me, I believe, more alarm, more pain, than if I had received, unexpectedly, at close quarters, a charge of small

shot in the ravine. This impression was reinforced by what followed. Wonder I, said Watt, panky-hanky me lend you could, blood away wipe (161).

This is only the beginning of Watt's speech inversions: From here on, Watt engages in an intricate set of language reversals: he now talks "back to front" (164). This "inversion" happens in a number of different ways and is related by the narrator in an almost formulaic way,<sup>114</sup> each new type of inversion introduced by the same sentence ("The following is an example of Watt's manner at this period" (164)) or a variation thereof ("For example" (168)), followed by a statement of the narrator's professed inability to understand Watt ("These were sounds that at first, though we walked breast to breast, were devoid of significance for me" (165), or a variation thereof ("These were sounds that at first, though we walked pubis to pubis, were so much Irish to me" (167)), and of Watt's inability to understand the narrator ("Nor did Watt follow me" (165)), expressed in the latest style of his inversion ("Beg pardon, pardon" (166), or "Nodrap geb, he said, nodrap, nodrap geb" (166) or "Geb nodrap, nodrap" (165)) and a reassurance that soon the narrator "grew used to these sounds, and then I understood as well as before" (165), or a variation thereof ("But soon I grew used to these sounds" (165)).

Some of Watt's sequences are rather poetic and in any case still more or less intelligible: "*Day of most, night of part, Knott with now,*" for instance (164). Or, "*Of nought. To the source. To the teacher. To the temple. To him I brought. This empty heart*" (166). Or, "*Say he'd, No, waistcoat the, vest the, trousers the, socks the, shoes the, shirt the, drawers the, coat the, dress to ready things got had when*" (167) – although this

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<sup>114</sup> Inversion is, of course, a stylistic as well as a linguistic phenomenon, and it works stylistically in *Watt* as well, inasmuch as Watt's style is what makes the character of Watt. For this discussion, however, I will focus on inversion as a linguistic concept.

instance sounds perhaps more aphasic than poetic.<sup>115</sup> But the majority sound like the meaningless babble of a madman: “*Ot bro, lap rulb, krad klub*” (165), “*Deen did taw? Tonk. Tog da taw? Tonk*” (166), “*Lit yad mac, ot og. Ton taw, ton tonk. Ton dob, ton trips*” (167), or:

*Dis yb dis, nem owt. Yad la, tin fo trap. Skin, skin, skin. Od su did ned taw? On. Taw ot klat tonk? On. Tonk ot klat taw? On. Tonk ta kool taw? On. Taw to kool tonk? Nilb, mun, mud. Tin fo trap, yad la. Nem owt, dis yb dis* (168).

Which translates roughly to “Sid by sid, two men. Al day, part of nit. Dum, num, blin. Knot look at wat? No. Wat look at knot? No. Wat talk to knot? No. Knot talk to wat? No. Wat den did us do? Niks, niks, niks. Part of nit, al day. Two men, sid by sid.” Although Watt carries through these modifications “with all his usual discretion and sense of what was acceptable to the ear, and aesthetic judgment” (165), they nevertheless make little sense.

These inversions of Watt’s have been read in a number of ways. Ann Beer interprets them as representing “in the most extreme form the defamiliarization of language” (“Watt, Knott” 70). But most critics see Watt’s inversions simply as “nonsense language” (Mooney 83) or as a proof that “Watt has lost the ability to speak”. Yet perhaps it can be explained as another way in which French “cross-fertilizes” Beckett’s English here. Critical inquiry has been directed at showing the influence of Beckett’s French on his English in *Watt*, and on trying to determine whether these instances are unconscious slips, or rather constitute a conscious multilingual play,<sup>116</sup> yet Watt’s inversions have not been regarded in this way. Whereas in fact, word inversions or

<sup>115</sup> See Laura Salisbury’s 2008 article “‘What is the Word’: Beckett’s Aphasic Modernism,” for an interesting comparison between Beckett’s poetics and aphasia.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. for instance Beer’s article “‘Watt’, Knott and Beckett’s Bilingualism.”

metathesis, the transposition of sounds or letters in a word are an old French literary and cultural tradition.

Part of the reason the French use these inversions is because French is not a language that lends itself easily to punning. French is shaped by Latin, both on the level of the word and syntactically, and this makes it more restrictive. English, on the other hand, is loose, ambiguous, lending itself extraordinarily well to wit and wordplay – something Joyce exploits in *Finnegans Wake*. In his “Author’s Note” to *A Personal Record*, Conrad writes about his decision not to write in French, “I would have been afraid to attempt expression in a language so perfectly ‘crystallised’” (200), implying English is, as it were, more flexible, a flexibility of which both Conrad and Joyce take maximum advantage.

The French inversions are most well-known today in the form of the notorious “verlan,” the French slang that reverses the syllables or even letters of words (the name verlan itself is an inversion of the French term “l’envers,” “the reverse”). In its current form it originated among the North African inhabitants of the Paris banlieues, for whom it represented a type of linguistic rebelliousness, talking backwards as a way of talking back, messing with the “pure” French language – which is probably why one of the best known verlan words is “beur,” from “Arabe.” Yet, paradoxically, this rebellious language from the periphery of sophisticated life was quickly incorporated into mainstream French culture, spoken now also by yuppies and bobos (young urban professionals and bourgeois-bohemians), used in movies and advertisement campaigns and even the subject of academic studies and dictionaries – after which the “beurs” reverlanized “beur” into “reub.”

But verlan is much older than the Paris banlieues. Although the word itself seems to date from the nineteen sixties, the practice was already used by the medieval Tristan, when he concealed his identity by giving his name as Tantris, and some say Voltaire is a verlanization of Airvault, where one of Voltaire's parents had property. In the sixteenth century the house of Bourbon was sometimes called bonbour, and Louis XV, or "quinze," was dubbed "sequinzouil." In the nineteenth century inversions were used as secret code by criminals and prisoners when they wanted to speak without guards or police ("les keufs," verlan for "les flics," today reverlanized to "les feuks") understanding them. And during the Second World War, verlan was widespread as a way of avoiding the German occupier understanding illegal messages. Auguste Le Breton, who uses verlan a lot in his works (most notably in his novel *Du rififi chez les homes* (1953)), "suggests a resurgence and spread of verlan during the occupation" (Lefkowitz 53). According to le Breton, the verlan word "brelica" for instance, the inverse of "calibre," itself an argot word for revolver, was widely used during the occupation (Nieser 4).

Beckett, who was not only well-versed in both French literature and history but who, as we saw before, joined the resistance, would have been familiar with this practice, and Watt's "nonsense language" might have been inspired by it. The manuscript of the novel is illuminating here. Interestingly, the passages dedicated to Watt's inversions are some of the few, if not the only, easily legible ones. Beckett's handwriting is notoriously difficult to decipher,<sup>117</sup> and yet these passages read easily, suggesting that they were written with extreme care.

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<sup>117</sup> Commenting on the *No Symbols* catalogue of the Harry Ransom Centre, where they acknowledge Beckett's hieroglyphic handwriting in the *Watt* manuscript but add, "Eppur si legge!", Ruby Cohn, who

Moreover, the passages go through a number of revisions and they are rife with corrections. So, for instance, the sequence we saw above, “Skin, skin, skin. Od su did new taw? On. Taw ot klat tonk? On” (168), first read: “La ta twon, twon, twon. Od ev did net taw? On. Em ot klat e did? On” (Ms A 4, 117), and in “Tog did tub” (Ms A 4, 134), “did” is crossed out and replaced by “da,” which is how it appears in the published *Watt* (166). This suggests that these passages are not random but carefully crafted and thought-through. They might originally have been intended to take up more space in the book than they do now, as there are several inversed passages in the manuscript that do not appear in the published novel.

In the manuscript there is also another passage of inversed language, not connected with Watt himself, and not included in the published novel. It appears in notebook number three, where it takes up a number of pages, and it is an elaborate play on the sentence “danger, this ditch is poisonous,” accompanied by a doodle of a man laying next to a ditch. First we are given a number of variations of the sentence: “Dangerofdeaththishereditchispoisoneddangerofdeath,” or “thisditchordykeispoisoned,” always written in capital letters and in a square form (like this, for instance:

THISD  
ITCHO  
RDYKE  
ISPOI  
SONED)

Then, the different variations of the phrase are inversed, so we read, for instance:

“htaedforegnaddenosiopsihctiderehsihthtaedforegnad,” again in capitals and in a square shape. The final version of the sentence becomes “danger this ditch is poisoned.” It

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admits she is often “baffled” trying to decode Beckett’s writing, retorts, “That depends on the reader!” (*Beckett Canon*, 109) In a letter to Alan Schneider, Beckett comments on his own handwriting: “I can’t face my typewriter these days, so you’ll have to make the best you can of my foul fist” (*Disjecta* 107)

appears in the manuscript inversed and as part of the narrative: “prepared in capital letters came [this cited]

DENOS  
IOPSI  
HCTID  
SIHTR  
EGNAD

Denos iopsi! A sliver ran down his spine” (Ms A 3, 23). The spine here belongs to Arsene and the code is successful: he does not seem to understand what it means.

Thus, like the inversions of *verlan*, Beckett’s inversions are not random but carefully crafted and they intend to convey a secret meaning. They are not so much, or not just, a defamiliarization of language, but an artistic reinvention, a playful way of using English according to the rules of French language play. In *Watt*, Beckett plays with English as if it is French, he takes a characteristic of French and uses it in English. (Whereas in *L’Innommable* he will do the opposite. English can be grammatical and still not clear, in French this is not possible. But in *L’Innommable*, Beckett creates sentences that are grammatically correct, yet completely devoid of meaning.) This, then, is an instance of the concrete effect of bilingualism on the actual writing, a cross-over of one language into another.

### ***Three Novels: Beckett’s Prison-House of Language***

If *Watt* shows language becoming increasingly the topic, a plaything, rather than just the medium of narration, this is even more the case in Beckett’s Trilogy – a term that he disliked, preferring *Three Novels*.<sup>118</sup> That language will feature prominently in these

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<sup>118</sup> “Not ‘Trilogy,’ I beseech you, just the three titles and nothing else” Beckett wrote in a letter to the publisher, and he would refer to it as the “so-called-trilogy” (Grove Companion to SB, p. 586), but later



*Three Novels* as it did in *Watt*, becomes clear on the second page of *Molloy* (and on the first page of the English translation) when Molloy, who, like Watt, has “quite a sensitive ear” (49) (“ayant l’oreille assez fine” (66)) announces his ignorance of language: “J’ai oublié l’orthographe aussi, et la moitié des mots,” (8) “I’ve forgotten how to spell too, and half the words” (7). Molloy’s difficulty with language, which, paradoxically, he describes “fairly coherently” (Taylor, “Pidgin Bullskrit” 216), becomes the central issue of the three novels and explodes in *L’Innommable*, where language is no longer capable of doing anything but contradict itself and throw doubt over everything.

The realization of the impotence of language starts in *Molloy*, but in a less extreme form. “Quelle langue,” (15) “What rigmarole,” (13) the narrator comments disdainfully on his own monologue early on in the narrative, followed by a passage that foreshadows the predicament of the unnamable:

Et je suis à nouveau je ne dirais pas seul, non, ce n’est pas mon genre, mais, comment dire, je ne sais pas, rendu à moi, non, je ne me suis jamais quitté, libre, voilà, je ne sais pas ce que cela ça veut dire mais c’est le mot que j’entends employer (15-16). (And once again I am I will not say alone, no, that’s not like me, but how shall I say, I don’t know, restored myself, no, I never left myself, free, yes, I don’t know what that means but it’s the word I mean to use (13)).

The search for the right words, and the discovery and acceptance that there are no right words is the central preoccupation of these novels, and is parodied by the unnamable when he declares that “shit” is the word he had been searching, “there we have it at last, there it is at last, the right word, one only has to seek” (365): “c’est comme de la merde, voilà enfin, le voilà enfin, le mot juste, il suffit de chercher” (160).

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suggested himself the title *Three Novels* (id. 596.) In a letter to Con Leventhal he calls it a “pseudo trilogy” (quoted in Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 179), echoing his description, in *L’Innommable*, of the “pseudo-couple Mercier-Camier.” (19)

The limits of language, the knowledge of the inadequacy of language are central to these *Three Novels*, and a direct consequence of Beckett's metalinguistic awareness as a result of his bilingualism. Where a monolingual is unaware of the "holes" and gaps in his own language and is thus falsely comforted by a sense of linguistic security, a bilingual can no longer harbor such illusions. Transgressing linguistic limits shows the limits of *all* language. As Molloy puts it:

Et que je dise ceci ou cela ou autre chose, peu importe vraiment. Dire c'est inventer. Faux comme de juste. On n'invente rien, on croit inventer, s'échapper, on ne fait que balbutier sa leçon, des bribes d'un pensum appris et oublié, la vie sans larmes, telle qu'on la pleure. Et puis merde. (41). (And truly it little matters what I say, this, this or that or any other thing. Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept. To hell with it anyway (31-32)).

Molloy is fully aware of the arbitrariness of his language, of all language: "la condition de l'objet était d'être sans nom, et inversement" (41), "there are no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names" (31), thus in a way continuing where Watt left off in his discussion of Mr. Knott's pots.

Molloy consciously struggles with language – and not just with words but with grammar too, as in the following instance where he is visibly grappling with the rules of French grammar: "Mais ce n'est pas la peine que je prolonge le récit de cette tranche de ma, mon, de mon existence, car elle n'a pas de signification, à mon sens" (74). In the English version this little grammatical struggle is lost as it becomes a more general uncertainty over words: "But it is useless to drag out this chapter of my, how shall I say, my existence, for it has no sense, to my mind" (56) – and this struggle becomes the topic

of his narrative. The contrast with Jacques Moran's monologue is stark, and makes Molloy's linguistic doubts even more perceptible.

For the seemingly monolingual Moran language is reliable, clear. Juliette Taylor has written: "Jacques Moran, on the other hand, is apparently writing his report in his mother tongue, manifesting a sense of linguistic security that is entirely characteristic of his monolingual perspective. Unaware of the arbitrariness of his own language, he is unquestioning in his faith in the effectiveness of naming and categorisation" (Taylor, "Pidgin Bullskrit" 217). Yet of course this sense of security is false, and Moran's excessive insistence on his confidence in language seems to hint at an underlying doubt. His short, simple and declarative sentences ("Je m'appelle Moran, Jacques. On m'appelle ainsi. Je suis fichu. Mon fils aussi. Il ne doit pas pas s'en douter." (125) "My name is Moran, Jacques. That is the name I am known by. I am done for. My son too. All unsuspecting" (92)) seem a desperate attempt at staying in control of language. If a native speaker is indeed "less in control of the language" and instead the "language controls him" (Teicholz 47), then this is something Moran suspects and fears. His fears are confirmed at the end of his report when, just as for Molloy, and for Watt before him, for Moran too language has lost its ability to describe the world: "Alors je rentrai dans la maison, et j'écrivis, Il est minuit. La pluie fouette les vitres. Il n'était pas minuit. Il ne pleuvait pas" (239). "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (176).

In this respect *Malone meurt* shows an obvious progression from Moran and Molloy. Malone's narrative is rife with hesitations about language, with linguistic confusion, with confessions of ignorance and impotence: "Mon corps est ce qu'on

appelle, peut-être à la légère, impotent” (18), “My body is what is called, unadvisedly perhaps, impotent” (186). As with Molloy, there is constant insecurity about language: “La plainte du sommier fait partie de ma vie, je ne voudrais pas qu’elle s’arrête, je veux dire que je ne voudrais pas qu’elle s’atténue” (19), “The groaning of the bedstead is part of my life, I would not like it to cease, I mean I would not like it to decrease” (186); “Vivre et inventer. J’ai essayé. J’ai dû essayer. Inventer. Ce n’est pas le mot. Vivre non plus” (33), “Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live” (194); “Vivre. J’en parle sans savoir ce que ça veut dire” (34), “I say living without knowing what it is” (195) et cetera.

Every sentence, every, utterance, every word is doubted: “J’attribuerais volontiers une partie de mes, de mes infortunes à ce désordre auditif” (54-55), “I would willingly attribute part of my shall I say my misfortune to this disordered sense” (207) (this calls to mind also Molloy’s struggle with the possessive pronoun); “dans une sorte de pâte boueuse, pas une pâte boueuse, une sorte de pâte boueuse” (113), “into a kind of muddy pulp, not a muddy pulp, a kind of muddy pulp” (207), and Malone keeps referring to his own monologue as “galimatias” or “Bêtises” (54, 164), “gibberish,” “Drivel, drivel” (207, 272), or even sheer lies: “Que tout ça est faux” (34), “How false all this is” (195). When he writes about Sapo that he was sorry “he could make no meaning of the babel raging in his head” (193) (“Alors il regrettait [...] de ne rien entendre, ou si peu, au charabia [...] dans sa tête” (30)), one suspects Malone must be projecting his own state of mind.

And foreshadowing that of the unnamable narrator of *L’Innommable*. The unnamable does not just display a metalinguistic awareness, metalinguistic awareness

seems to be all he has. The unnamable has no body: he has no nose (305, 36), no head (345), and no mouth (384),<sup>119</sup> instead he is “une grande boule parlante” (37), “a big talking ball” (305), “je suis en mots, je suis fait de mots, des mots des autres” (204), “I’m in words, made of words, others’ words” (386). This hints at the crux of the unnamable’s predicament: he is nothing but words, yet he is convinced these words do not belong to him. “Je n’ai que leur langage à eux” (78) “I have no language but theirs” (325) “Ils parlent la même langue, la seule qu’ils m’aient apprise” (101-102) “all solicit me in the same tongue, the only one they taught me” (337) – and this becomes a recurring theme throughout the narrative.

Because the unnamable is forced to express himself in a language not his own, he is unable to understand his own speech (“A aucun moment je ne sais de quoi je parle, ni de qui, ni de quand, ni d’où, ni avec quoi, ni pourquoi” (105) “At no moment do I know what I am talking about, nor of whom, nor of where, nor how, nor why” 338), or that of others: “Je vais le leur arranger, leur charabia. Auquel je n’ai jamais rien compris” (76) “But I’ll fix their gibberish for them. I never understood a word of it in any case” (325), culminating in his addressing his own “incomprehension”: “Chère incompréhension” (76). He is so conscious of the inadequacy of language, of the certainty that he does not own his language, that he is convinced everything he says is a lie: “Cette voix qui parle, se sachant mensongère” (40), “This voice that speaks, knowing that it lies” (307), “je l’ai inventée,”(54) “A balayer” (55). “I invented it all,” “All lies” (314), and again “Mensonges, mensonges” (71) “Lies, lies” (322).

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<sup>119</sup> The unnamable’s bodiless state recalls the “redheaded man” of Daniil Charms: “There lived a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn’t have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily. He couldn’t talk because he had no mouth. He had no nose either. He didn’t even have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, he had no spine, and he had no innards at all. He didn’t have anything. So we don’t even know who we’re talking about. It’s better that we don’t talk about him any more” (Charms 34).

It is hard not to see a political dimension to the unnamable's sense that his language is not his, knowing the linguistic history of Ireland, the fact that under the influence of the English dominance of the island English replaced Irish as the national language. The unnamable's assertion that he has "no language but theirs" echoes the words of Stephen Dedalus in the famous "funnel" passage from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. We saw it in the previous chapter, but I'll quote it here again:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master* on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language (193).

The connection between the words of others and the impossibility of not lying calls to mind Italo Svevo, whose protagonist Zeno writes in the autobiography he reluctantly composes for his psychoanalyst:

Il dottore presta una fede troppo grande anche a quelle mie benedette confessioni che non vuole restituirmi perché le riveda. Dio mio! Egli non studiò che la medicina e perciò ignora che cosa significhi scrivere in italiano per noi che parliamo e non sappiamo scrivere il dialetto. Una confessione in iscritto è sempre menzognera. Con ogni nostra parola toscana noi mentiamo! Se egli sapesse come raccontiamo con predilezione tutte le cose per le quali abbiamo pronta la frase e come evitiamo quelle che ci obbligherebbero di ricorrere al vocabolario! È proprio così che scegliamo dalla nostra vita avrebbe tutt'altro aspetto se fosse detta nel nostro dialetto (401-402). (The doctor puts too much faith also in those damned confessions of mine, which he won't return to me so I can revise them. Good heavens! He studied only medicine and therefore doesn't know what it means to write in Italian for those of us who speak the dialect but can't write it. A confession in writing is always a lie. With our every Tuscan word, we lie! If only he knew how, by predilection, we recount all the things for which we have the words at hand, and how we avoid those things that would oblige us to turn to the dictionary! This is exactly how we choose, from our life, the episodes to underline. Obviously our life would have an entirely different aspect if it were told in our dialect (404)).

Although his native language is Triestino, the language of Trieste, itself consisting of a mix of a number of European languages,<sup>120</sup> Zeno is forced to express himself, to write his memoir, in the official Tuscan of his doctor, drawing attention to the artificial nature of Italy's national language (or of any national language) and the subsequent marginalization of the many local languages of anybody not from Tuscany.<sup>121</sup>

Yet although there is undoubtedly a political facet to the unnamable's assertions,<sup>122</sup> there is also a linguistic aspect to it, and in fact Zeno's observations illuminate this too. Bilinguals – and Svevo too was bilingual: while he wrote in Italian, he spoke Triestino and German in his daily life – bilinguals often report that they feel “they change personality when they change languages” (Klosty Beaujour 44). Klosty Beaujour cites the linguist Einar Haugen, himself bilingual, who explains: “The popular impression that a man alters his personality when speaking another tongue is far from ill-grounded. When I speak German to Germans, I automatically shift my orientation as a social being” (ibid).

Bilingual writers, too, have commented on this phenomenon and often report that their autobiographical writings are different depending on which of their languages they write them in. The French-English Julian Green recounts, for example, that when he decided to write about his childhood in English instead of French, his autobiography was

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<sup>120</sup> Triestino is a hybrid of different Italian dialects as well as a number of other languages, including Turkish, Armenian, Hungarian, German, Croatian, Slovenian, Greek, Czech and even some English – John McCourt mentions a nice example of English in Triestino: the word “sonababic,” from “son of a bitch” (259).

<sup>121</sup> This was of course also Svevo's own predicament. In fact, it seems to have been mainly out of chauvinist snobbery about Svevo's “incorrect,” because not purely Tuscan, Italian that he was ignored as an author the first decades of his writing life, and that he almost quit writing altogether – which probably would have happened had Joyce not entered the Triestine scene and encouraged him. But that is another story.

<sup>122</sup> Quite a lot has been written on the “Irish Beckett,” the importance of Ireland and its history for Beckett's works, cf. for instance Mary Junker or Sean Kennedy.

completely altered: “I was writing another book, a book so different in tone from the French that a whole aspect of the subject must of necessity be altered. It was as if, writing in English, I had become another person” (quoted in Klosty Beaujour 46).

If one’s self shifts depending on the language in which one finds oneself, then naturally the manner in which one narrates oneself also results in different stories. Yet this does not mean that only one of them is “true” and the other must therefore be “false,” but it might feel that way, as it does for Zeno. The unnamable gives, as it were, a literal rendition of this sentiment. So aware is he of his inability of telling the truth in any language that he comes to feel trapped, trapped in words, trapped in language. This awareness translates into a recurring talk of prisons: “pas besoin de murs, si, il faut des murs, il m’en faut, bien épais, il me faut une prison, j’avais raison, pour moi tout seul, je vais y aller, je vais m’y mettre, j’y suis déjà” (253) “no need of walls, yes, we must have walls, I need walls, good and thick, I need a prison, I was right, for me alone, I’ll go there now, I’ll put me in it, I’m there already” (410), and, in a passage the breathlessness of which gives a feeling of being trapped, in language, or by language, almost to the point of being suffocated by it:

Enorme prison, comme cent mille cathédrales, plus jamais autre chose, dorénavant, et là-dedans, quelque part, peut-être, rivé, infime, le détenu, comment le trouver, que cet espace est faux, quelle fausseté aussitôt, vouloir y nouer des rapports, vouloir y mettre un être, une cellule suffirait, si j’abandonnais, si je pouvais abandonner, avant de commencer, avant de recommencer, quel halètement, c’est ça, des exclamations, ça fait continuer, ça retarde l’échéance, non, c’est le contraire, je ne sais pas, repartir, dans cette immensité, dans cette obscurité, faire les mouvements de repartir, alors qu’on ne peut pas bouger, alors qu’on n’est jamais parti, on le con, faire les mouvements, quels mouvements, on ne peut pas bouger (250-251). (Enormous prison, like a hundred thousand cathedrals, never anything else any more, from this time forth, and in it, somewhere, perhaps, riveted, tiny, the prisoner, how can he be found, how false this space is, what falseness instantly, to want to draw that round you, to want to put a being there, a cell would be plenty, if I gave up, if



only I could give up, before beginning, before beginning again, what breathlessness, that's right, ejaculations, that helps you on, that puts off the fatal hour, no, the reverse, I don't know, start again, in this immensity, this obscurity, go through the motions of starting again, you who can't stir, you who never started, you the who, go through the motions, what motions, you can't stir) (409).

The unnamable literally finds himself in a "prison-house of language."<sup>123</sup>

The notion of being trapped in language recalls Nietzsche's essay "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense."<sup>124</sup> Although Beckett does not himself invoke Nietzsche, a quick look at this essay might illuminate the unnamable's predicament. Nietzsche suggests that human beings are all trapped in language because language is nothing but a set of conventions of which we have forgotten that they are conventions. Thus, according to Nietzsche, "truth" is nothing but an agreed upon lie. We create linguistic truths, which are lies, but we have forgotten that they are lies. We all lie according to the same convention and this is called truth. We live in a world of metaphors of which we have forgotten that they are metaphors and take them for the things themselves. In fact, language itself is nothing but metaphors: "Ein Nervenreiz, zuerst übertragen in ein Bild! Erste Metapher. Das Bild wieder nachgeformt in einem Laut! Zweite Metapher" (879). ("To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor" (82)). Thus, writes Nietzsche: "Wir glauben etwas von den Dingen selbst zu wissen, wenn wir von Bäumen, Farben, Schnee und Blumen reden, und besitzen doch nichts als Metaphern der Dinge, die den ursprünglichen Wesenheiten ganz und gar nicht entsprechen" (879). ("We believe that we

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<sup>123</sup> Cf. Fredric Jameson's *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*.

<sup>124</sup> The German is "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn;" a better translation would be "in an Extramoral Sense."

know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things, metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities” (83)). The unnamable hints at something similar when he exclaims: “I like this colourful language, these bold metaphors and apostrophes” (333).

About man Nietzsche writes: “wenn er einen Augenblick nur aus den Gefängniswänden dieses Glaubens heraus könnte, so wäre es sofort mit seinem ‘Selbstbewußtsein’ vorbei” (883-4). (“If but for an instant he could escape from the prison walls of this faith, his ‘self-consciousness’ would be immediately destroyed” (86)). In other words: if he were to do away with metaphor, man would dispense with himself. For Nietzsche, art is the only possible way out of this web:

Jenes ungeheure Gebälk und Bretterwerk der Begriffe, an das sich klammernd der bedürftige Mensch sich durch das Leben rettet, ist dem freigewordenen Intellekt nur ein Gerüst und ein Spielzeug für seine verwegenen Kunststücke: und wenn er es zerschlägt, durcheinanderwirft, ironisch wieder zusammensetzt, das Fremdeste paarend und das Nächste trennend, so offenbart er, daß er jene Notbehelfe der Bedürftigkeit nicht braucht und daß er jetzt nicht von Begriffen, sondern von Intuitionen geleitet wird. (888) (That immense framework and planking of concepts to which the needy man clings his whole life long in order to preserve himself is nothing but a scaffolding and toy for the most audacious feats of the liberated intellect. And when it smashes this framework to pieces, throws it into confusion, and puts it back together in an ironic fashion, pairing the most alien things and separating the closest, it is demonstrating that it has no need of these makeshifts of indigence and that it will now be guided by intuitions rather than by concepts (90)).

Art tears at the web of concepts that we have ourselves constructed, it will tear little holes in the web that we ourselves have woven. In this way it can draw attention to the web itself. According to Nietzsche, art works through deception, art treats a lie as a lie, an illusion as an illusion; art announces itself as a lie and therefore it is true. Nietzsche does

this himself in his essay, through an excessive use of metaphors (man is a moth, “fluttering around the solitary flame of vanity” (80),<sup>125</sup> he is a spider weaving a spider’s web, etc.) In a self-reflexive and ironic way he performs his own program. As we saw earlier, in his German letter to Axel Kaun, Beckett too wanted to drill holes in language “until that which lurks behind it, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through.” The unnamable tries, but fails.

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<sup>125</sup> “hier ist die Täuschung, das Schmeicheln, Lügen und Trügen, das Hinter-dem-Rücken-Reden, das Repräsentieren, das im erborgten Glanze Leben, das Maskiertsein, die verhüllende Konvention, das Bühnenspiel vor anderen und vor sich selbst, kurz das fortwährende Herumflattern um die *eine* Flamme Eitelkeit” (876).

## Chapter Four

### As American as April in Arizona:

### Vladimir Nabokov's Linguistic Exile

My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses – the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions – which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way.  
(Afterword to *Lolita*, 316-317)

Unlike Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov has commented on his own multilingualism elaborately. He enthusiastically analyzed his switch from writing in Russian to writing in English for any journalist or critic who was interested in the topic (many were). Yet when looking at the many claims he made about his own linguistic development, an interesting tension seems to arise. On the one hand, Nabokov emphasized his English-oriented upbringing and portrayed his writing in English as a most natural thing. When one interviewer suggests, "It is very dramatic to think of you bidding farewell to one language and embarking on a new life in another," Nabokov casually replies, "Oh, I did know I would eventually land in America" (*SO* 88).<sup>126</sup> On the other hand, however, Nabokov frequently stressed the pain that his "farewell to Russian" caused him and in private letters (as opposed to public interviews) broached the difficulties and insecurities that writing in English caused him.

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<sup>126</sup> All references to *Strong Opinions* will be cited parenthetically in the text as *SO*.

## Nabokov and English

In order to understand this tension, which fuelled most of his American works and many of his Russian ones as well, I go back to Nabokov's linguistic beginnings. Although in fact, it is not so much a tension between his earlier writing in Russian and his later writing in English, as a struggle between his multilingual upbringing and his desire to become a "pure" monolingual Russian writer, a struggle that was not resolved until he found the multilingual style of his English writings.

Like Humbert Humbert's relationship with *Lolita*, Nabokov's "love affair" with the English language was tempestuous (*Lolita* 316). In interviews he would frequently comment on the "pangs" (*SO* 89) that his transition from writing in Russian to writing exclusively in English ("that atrocious metamorphosis" (*Selected Letters* 149)) had given him. In a conversation with Robert Hughes in 1965 Nabokov described the change like this: "My complete switch from Russian prose to English prose was exceedingly painful – like learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion" (*SO* 54). Nabokov gives his "loss" a graphic physical image with overtones of bloodshed and permanent handicap.<sup>127</sup> This is significant. While Nabokov often presented himself as a de facto native speaker of English, the pain his "switch" caused him shows that in reality his relation with English was complicated.

In interviews and in his autobiography *Speak, Memory* (all from after he moved to the United States and began his career as an American writer) Nabokov repeatedly emphasized his own Americanness. America was the only country where he felt "mentally and emotionally at home" (*SO* 131), and when an interviewer asked him, "Do

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<sup>127</sup> Reminiscent perhaps of the bellicose language Joyce used in speaking (and writing) about his use of English.

you consider yourself an American?” Nabokov answered, “Yes, I do. I am as American as April in Arizona” (*SO* 98). However, about this “little comment” Klosty Beaujour (herself a “real” American) speculates:

No ‘strictly’ American writer would have come up with ‘I am as American as April in Arizona,’ which sounds peculiar to the American ear precisely because it conceals and transforms so many clichés of American culture: ‘as American as apple pie’ (with its series of A’s and P’s); ‘as corny as Kansas in August’ (with its *K* sounds, a state name, and the month); and it echoes the song ‘April in Paris,’ which may in fact be particularly American in its yearning for the lost chestnut blossoms of European springs (82).

Moreover, Nabokov drew attention to his multilingual upbringing in a family that leaned strongly toward “Anglo-Saxon civilization” (*SM* 63):<sup>128</sup> “I was bilingual as a baby (Russian and English) and added French at five years of age. In my early boyhood all the notes I made on the butterflies I collected were in English, with various terms borrowed from that most delightful magazine *The Entomologist*. It published my first paper (on Crimean butterflies) in 1920” (*SO* 5).

Nabokov was raised by what he described as a “bewildering sequence of English nurses and governesses” (*SO* 68), and, as a consequence, he “had spoken English with the same ease as Russian,” since his earliest infancy (*SO* 189). Andrew Field even claims that Nabokov told him English was actually his first language and that when he was very small his mother sometimes had to translate Russian words into English for him (127). He learned to read English before he could read Russian: “My first English friends were four simple souls in my grammar – Ben, Dan, Sam and Ned. There used to be a great deal of fuss about their identities and whereabouts – ‘Who is Ben?’ ‘He is Dan,’ ‘Sam is in bed,’ and so on” (*SM* 63). In fact, when Nabokov was about six years old, his

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<sup>128</sup> All references to Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* will be cited parenthetically in the text as *SM*.

father discovered “with patriotic dismay” that Nabokov and his brother “could read and write English but not Russian (except KAKAO and MAMA)” (which are, of course, spelled the same in the Cyrillic and the Latin alphabet, so they don’t really count) (*SO* 24). Young Nabokov perused the “Boy’s Own Paper” (*SM* 31) his mother would read him English fairy tales, his father read Dickens out loud “(in English of course)” to the Nabokov children “on rainy evenings in the country” (*Selected Letters* 246), and his first nighttime prayers were in English: “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, something something little child.” All this led Nabokov to conclude that he was, essentially, “an English child” (*SO* 81).

Yet Nabokov was not an English child. He was a Russian child, born and raised in Russia by Russian parents, who happened to grow up in an Anglophile family. The same memoir in which he stresses his English upbringing draws attention also to the fact that he was not an English child: *Speak, Memory* is filled with words, phrases and untranslatable expressions in Russian. Nabokov remembers his mother telling him, when she wanted to draw his attention to “this or that loved thing in Vyra,” the Nabokov family’s country estate, “*Vot zapomni* [now remember],” and on the way to a village near Vyra there was a steep bit “where one preferred to take one’s ‘bike by the horns’ (*bika za roga*) as my father, a dedicated cyclist, liked to say (*SM* 33). The pages of Nabokov’s memoir are filled with Russian: in summer the Nabokovs love “the very Russian sport of *hodit’ po gribi* (looking for mushrooms)” (*SM* 35); ‘summer *soomerki* – the lovely Russian word for dusk” (*SM* 64); “the torpid trot of dejected *izvozchik* (cab) horses” (*SM* 70); “he was so *brezgliv*, in the Russian untranslatable sense, that he would wash his hands after touching banknotes or banisters” (*SM* 126), et cetera.

Thus, although English was present prominently in Nabokov's early childhood, the fact that his memories of every day events from that period are rife with Russian would suggest that the language of the Nabokov home was Russian. In fact, it appears that later in his childhood English took up a less dominant place. With regard to the "bewildering sequence of English nurses and governesses," Nabokov writes: "At a certain point they faded out of my life. French and Russian took over; and what little time remained for the speaking of English was devoted to occasional sessions with two gentlemen, Mr Burness and Mr Cummings, neither of whom dwelt with us" (*SM* 69). The early English, through lack of use, became overwritten by Russian and French.

Indeed, when, at age twenty, Nabokov arrived at Cambridge he quickly discovered that he was not that English after all. Brian Boyd, by far Nabokov's best and most thorough biographer, relates: "All the Anglophilism of his family was no help: the Englishness of his childhood was something belonging to the nursery, and now as a young man he found a barrier between himself and English undergraduates around him" (*RY* 167).<sup>129</sup> A barrier he was, at that time, not very keen to break. Nabokov spent his time at Cambridge mainly in the company of Russian friends, writing Russian poetry and reading in Dahl's *Interpretative Dictionary of the Living Russian Language*, which he studied assiduously: "I [...] resolved to read at least ten pages per day, jotting down such words and expressions as might especially please me, and I kept this up for a considerable time" (*SM* 204). In *Speak, Memory* he notes: "The story of my college years in England is really the story of my trying to become a Russian writer" (*SM* 201).

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<sup>129</sup> Boyd's biography comes in two parts: *The Russian Years* and *The American Years*. All references to these two volumes will be cited parenthetically in the text as *RY* and *AY*.



Nabokov kept this up during the years he lived in Berlin. Here, too, he surrounded himself by fellow Russian émigrés, married a Russian woman (Véra Slonim), read Russian newspapers, wrote for Russian journals and produced nine Russian novels. In fact, in the nearly twenty years he spent in Germany, he never really mastered the language. As Michael Wood puts it, he learned “almost as little German as he claimed” (1).

Thus, it is no surprise that he had difficulties when he first tried to write in English. Not only was English never quite native for Nabokov, in the sense that it was language he learned from governesses and Russian parents, but, as we have seen in chapter one, if “an earlier language is neglected it will be overwritten or suppressed over time by the new language” (de Groot 356) – or, in Nabokov’s case, an older language. When he started writing his first novel in English, he had to re-awaken his English, as it were.

In this, Nabokov’s situation is not unlike that of Eugène Ionesco. From the age of two, the half-Rumanian, half-French Ionesco grew up in France with his French mother, speaking, reading and writing in French. When, at age thirteen, he went to live with his Rumanian father in Bucharest, he had to learn Rumanian as a foreign language but learned quickly, writing and publishing poems and articles in Rumanian. When he returned to France in 1938, age twenty-seven, he found his once-native French had become rusty: “Quand je suis revenu en France, je savais le français, bien sûr, mais je ne savais plus l’écrire [...]. Cet apprentissage, ce désapprentissage, ce réapprentissage, je crois que ce sont des exercices intéressants” (quoted in Satgé 971) (“When I returned to

France, I knew French, of course, but I no longer knew how to write it... This learning, this unlearning, this relearning, I think these are interesting exercises").<sup>130</sup>

Ionesco's back-and-forth between French and Rumanian, and the increased linguistic consciousness this inevitably created, are the driving force of much of his writing, most notably his "tragédie du langage," *La cantatrice chauve*. Based on a "manuel pour apprendre l'anglais" (Ionesco, "La tragédie du langage" 159), this play exposes the arbitrariness of language through an increasingly absurd conversation between two couples, the Smiths and the Martins:

M. SMITH

Le pape dérape! Le pape n'a pas de soupape. La soupape a un pape.

Mme. MARTIN

Bazar, Balzac, Bazaine!

M. MARTIN

Bizarre, beaux-arts, baisers!

M. SMITH

A, c, i, o, u, a, c, i, o, u, a, c, i, o, u, i!

Mme. MARTIN

B, c, d, f, g, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, x, z!

M. MARTIN

De l'ail à l'eau, du lait à l'ail! Mme Smith, imitant le train. Teuff, teuff, teuff, teuff, teuff, teuff, teuff, teuff, teuff! (Ionesco, *La cantatrice chauve* 79)

In Ionesco's nonsense dialogues, the communicative function of language becomes secondary to its sound effects, something we will see in Nabokov's *Ada* as well – though

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<sup>130</sup> My translation.

in less extreme form.<sup>131</sup> (And, of course, we saw the same thing in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.)

Like Ionesco, Nabokov too had to re-learn writing in English. Unlike Ionesco, he never publicly admitted this, but Boyd documents that Nabokov needed help when, in 1938, he began writing his first novel in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.<sup>132</sup> Like James Joyce, Nabokov was a close friend of Paul and Lucie Léon, and it was Lucie Léon whom he asked for help when he was working on *Sebastian Knight* and was afraid that his English might betray him. She recalls: "he was most anxious that this first novel in English should sound neither 'foreign' nor read as though it had been translated into English" (RY 503). And so, a couple of times a week, sitting at the same mahogany kitchen table where for twelve years Paul Léon had worked with Joyce on *Finnegans Wake*, Lucie Léon and Nabokov would go over the manuscript together to check it for solecisms (RY 503).

Nevertheless, in spite of this hard work at the English, when in 1941 Edmund Wilson pointed out to Nabokov that there are still some mistakes in the English, Nabokov replied:

You are quite, quite right about the slips. There are many clumsy expressions and foreignish mannerisms that I noticed myself when reading the book again after five years had passed; but if I started correcting them I would rewrite the

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<sup>131</sup> In "La tragédie du langage" Ionesco explains: "Le texte de *La Cantatrice chauve* ou du manuel pour apprendre l'anglais (ou le russe, ou le portugais), composé d'expressions toutes faites, des clichés les plus éculeés, me révélait, par cela même, les automatismes du langage, du comportement des gens, le 'parler pour rien dire'" (159)

<sup>132</sup> In fact, Boyd relates that already in 1935 Nabokov had written a small biographical sketch in English "of his associations with England in early childhood" (RY 420). The piece has not survived but its title has, and Boyd suggests that this title indicates the difficulties writing in English caused Nabokov: "'It is Me,' neither the natural English 'It's Me,' nor the 'It is I' that muddled purists suppose more correct" (RY 420-421).

whole thing. My suggestion (which I know is not quite fair) is that the author of the *Life* writes English with difficulty (51).<sup>133</sup>

It seems to me that this is not only quite fair but also entirely accurate: when composing the *Real Life*, Nabokov *did* write English with difficulty.

Nabokov's uncertainty about his English becomes evident when reading his letters to Wilson. Here, he frequently comments on his lack of confidence with regard to writing in English and refers to his English as "my imitation English," "my pidgin" or "my pigeon-English" (*NW Letters* 36, 38, 51).<sup>134</sup> Occasionally Nabokov will admit to being unsure if he is using "le mot juste": "In fact I am quite flabbergasted – if that's the right word" (*NW Letters* 61).

Similarly, Brian Boyd has observed that Nabokov tried to get rid of certain mistakes in his spoken English: when preparing his lectures on literature at Cornell, he "often felt it necessary to mark the pronunciation of words in his lecture notes" (*AY* 196). Indeed, the manuscript of his lectures on Joyce's *Ulysses* shows him indicating the pronunciation of a number of words and proper names, the syllable stress in "allegory" and "discipline", the vowel length of the "y" in "chrysostomos" – the pronunciation of which Nabokov further facilitated by adding the word in the Cyrillic alphabet: "крисостомос." He even wrote down the correct pronunciation of *Ulysses* in Russian: "ю-ли-сиз," and added to this is a little note to himself in Russian, "повторить

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<sup>133</sup> Jane Grayson has demonstrated that comparisons of earlier and later versions of the same English translations of some of Nabokov's Russian novels (by himself) indicates that the later versions clearly show "an improvement of Nabokov's command of English. The vocabulary of an earlier work is often restricted and ill chosen; and much of the syntax bears marked influence of Russian constructions," whereas in later versions "Nabokov eliminates many examples of aberrant usage and employs a more varied and apt vocabulary" (185). Earlier versions show, for instance, that Nabokov had difficulties with English prepositions, with the use and sequence of tenses, and with English word order (185-188).

<sup>134</sup> All references to *Dear Bunny*, *Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* will be cited parenthetically in the text as *NW Letters*.

обязательно,” which means something like “you must absolutely repeat this.”<sup>135</sup>

Evidently he was quite conscious of his foreign, un-English pronunciation and needed Russian as a subsidiary aid here and there.

Recordings and TV interviews reveal that although his spoken English was eloquent and correct, it was clearly that of a non-native speaker. His British accent sounds contrived and underneath one hears an undercurrent of Russian, however faint. In sooth, Nabokov’s English is not unlike that of Sebastian Knight as described by his brother, the narrator of the novel:

It appears that Sebastian’s English, though fluent and idiomatic, was decidedly that of a foreigner. His ‘r’s, when beginning a word, rolled and rasped, he made queer mistakes, saying, for instance, ‘I have seized a cold’ or ‘that fellow is sympathetic’ – merely meaning that he was a nice chap.<sup>136</sup> He misplaced the accent in such words as ‘interesting’ or ‘laboratory.’ He mispronounced names like ‘Socrates’ or ‘Desdemona.’ Once corrected, he would never repeat the mistake, but the very fact of his not being quite sure about certain words distressed him enormously and he used to bluch a bright pink when, owing to a chance verbal flaw, some utterance of his would not be quite understood by an obtuse listener (48-49).

It is likely that Nabokov too was distressed by such slips.

In a letter to Wilson Nabokov admits to feelings of jealousy with regard to Wilson’s natural effortlessness with English: “I envy so bitterly your intimacy with English words, tumbling them as you do” and adds, “I have been pining away ever since the chairman of a women’s club where I had been reading my verses said with a lyrical leer: ‘what I loved best was the broken English’” (*NW Letters* 91). (Wilson dryly responds: “It is only occasionally that your English goes off the track” (*NW Letters* 110)). The first time Nabokov heard himself on the radio he was shocked, especially by his very

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<sup>135</sup> Nabokov’s *Lectures on Ulysses: A Facsimile of the Manuscript* is unpaginated. Unless otherwise stated, the Russian translations are my own.

<sup>136</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, Beckett made the exact same slip in English.

Russian-sounding “r” – resembling the rolling and rasping “r” of Sebastian Knight. He announced jestingly to friends that from now on he would try to overcome this quirk by pronouncing his r’s differently, and disguising “the dangerous letter” so that “I am Russian” would not sound like “I am RRRRRussian”, but would emerge as a slightly lisping “I am Wussian” (AY 91).

This may help interpret the famous comments Nabokov made, in the afterword to *Lolita*, about his transition from Russian to English. It is the quotation heading this chapter, but I’ll cite it here again as it is significant:

My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not, be anybody’s concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses – the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way (316-317).

Of course, Nabokov’s English is not really second-rate. On the contrary, it is, as Michael Wood writes, “a fabulous, freaky, singing, acrobatic, unheard-of English” (5). Nabokov is generally regarded as a master prose stylist in English, and is grouped together with James Joyce on the back of nearly every pocketbook edition of *Lolita* as the greatest writer in the English language. Some critics even find his brilliance in English incomparable, calling him “a stylist in English so dazzling he is without peer,” or “the most dazzling prose ever written in English” (Klosty-Beaujour 209). (Klosty Beaujour comments: “‘Dazzling’ seems to be the adjective of predilection to describe Nabokov’s writing” (ibid)). In fact, I don’t think that Nabokov himself believed his English was second-rate. His English sizzles and he knows it. What his demurral reveals, however, is a struggle with his new, his second language. Or, more accurately, with a language he

once knew well and then partially lost.

Yet I believe that this struggle, painful though it might have been, made his fiction infinitely richer. A comparison with some of his earlier, Russian works will illuminate this and will show that English gave Nabokov a linguistic freedom of which he had far less when he was writing in Russian. As a consequence, his Russian works are considerably less linguistically complex than his American ones.

### **Multilingual Tension in the Russian Novels**

Writing in Russian, Nabokov (or Sirin, the pseudonym under which he published his Russian works) was extremely concerned with keeping his Russian ‘pure,’ free from foreign languages. Remarking on the years he spent at Cambridge in his memoir, *Speak, Memory*, he writes: “My fear of losing or corrupting, through alien influence, the only thing I had salvaged from Russia – her language – became positively morbid” (*SM* 204). The same anxiety plagued him in Germany, as he admits in an interview: “Upon moving to Berlin I was beset by a panicky fear of somehow flawing my precious layer of Russian by learning to speak German fluently” (*SO* 189). (As we saw in the Beckett chapter, this is an entirely justified fear.) This desire for linguistic purity in Russian resulted in what he admitted himself were “polished and rather sterile Russian poems” (*SM* 205). His Russian novels, though not exactly ‘sterile,’ in any case do not feature the type of radical multilingual play we find in his American works. Unlike his novels in English, on the surface most of his Russian books are completely free of any multilingual interference.

Nabokov’s second Russian novel, for instance, *Король, дама, валет* (*Korol’, dama, valet*), or *King, Queen, Knave*, shows this very clearly. It was published in 1928 in

Berlin by the Russian émigré publishing house Слово (slovo) (literally: ‘word’). The novel is set in Berlin and its characters are German citizens with suitably German names: its protagonists are Franz Bubendorf, and Kurt and Martha Dreyer. The English version, translated by Nabokov together with his son Dmitri and published in 1968, does feature words in German here and there, probably to give the novel some local colour. In the Russian original, however, there are no German words to be found: the translation has either added them, or translated them from Russian to German.

Thus, in the first chapter, when Franz is travelling from his small hometown to cosmopolitan Berlin, we read in the English version that he is in “a second-class *schnellzug* car” (5) (express train), whereas in the Russian original he is only in a “вагон второго класса” (10) a second-class carriage. In the English translation Franz, in moments of confusion, will occasionally inquire, in German, “*Bitte?*” (26) (excuse me), while in the Russian this is either left out or translated to “Виноват?” (23) (excuse me). Similarly, in the English edition Martha enjoys receiving Martin in her garden ‘so elegantly *auf englische Weise*’ (28) (in the English way). This is entirely left out in the Russian. Here she does not seem to enjoy receiving him in the garden at all – or if she does, we are not told about it.

In the translation, much attention is paid to Dreyer’s inadequate English and his dreadful pronunciation, something that is completely absent in the Russian version – where we are not even told, for instance, that he speaks with a “Berlin accent,” as we are in the translation (6). Instead, Dreyer speaks “протяжно” (10), or “in a drawling fashion.” In the English version Nabokov is obviously enjoying himself with Dreyer’s terrible English. In the Russian we read about Dreyer, for example, in reaction to a



command by his wife, “Ладно, – ответил он по-английски и тихо вышел из холла” (101), ‘very well, he answered in English and quietly left the hall;’<sup>137</sup> in the English translation we read: ““All right, my treasury,” he answered in English, and walked away with his books” (140). Thus, the Russian original does not give us the mistake Dreyer makes as he addresses Martha in English, “my treasury” instead of “my treasure.” Likewise, in the translation we read how Dreyer, coming home from a skiing trip, delivers the following greeting to his wife: “*I am the voyageur,*’ he cried in his best English. *‘I half returned from shee-ing!’*” (160). This cannot be found in the Russian, where he returns without any such exclamation.

A little later, the English translation provides a more detailed account of Dreyer’s accent in English. He is playing tennis and admonishes his nephew: ““We are not playing American baseball or English cricket. This is a game called ‘lawn tennis’ because it was first played on grass.’ He invariably mispronounced ‘lawn’ as if it rhymed with ‘down’” (189), whereas in the original, all we get is: “Друг мой, – сказал он вкрадчиво, – мы не в лапту играем” (132). “My friend, he said softly, we are not playing “lapta”” (lapta is a Russian ball game).<sup>138</sup> In the English translation, this exchange is referred to again on the next page, where we read, about Martha:

“Occasionally he would ask her to dictate something to him. She knew fewer words than he but her pronunciation was perhaps a little better than his or at least different from his: her ‘lawn’ for example rhymed with ‘own’ and not ‘down,’ which was ridiculous, as she had told him, the obstinate fool” (190). In the Russian, on the other hand, we read:

“Случалось изредка, что он просил ее что-нибудь подиктовать. Она диктовала, хотя

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<sup>137</sup> My translation.

<sup>138</sup> My translation.

произносила еще хуже, чем он.” (133) “It happened occasionally that he asked her to dictate something. She dictated, although her pronunciation was even worse than his.”<sup>139</sup> Between the Russian and the English versions, Martha’s English seems rather to have improved, whereas that of Dreyer has deteriorated.

In the English translation, Dreyer’s bad English helps to portray him as absurd, and thus provides an additional reason for Martha to loathe him – in a sense, his bad English becomes an added motive for Martha’s wanting to kill him. In the Russian original, this aspect is completely absent. The occasional German words and the play on Dreyer’s poor pronunciation are non-existent.

We see something similar in Nabokov’s fifth Russian-language novel, *Подвиг* (*Podvig*), or *Glory*,<sup>140</sup> published in 1932. This book teems with multilingual characters, yet the text is rendered entirely in Russian. Dialogue that from the context can be understood to take place in English, German or French, is given in Russian. Yet, as with *Король, дама, валет*, the 1971 English translation prepared by Nabokov’s son Dmitri, and supervised by Nabokov himself, does feature bits of foreign languages. Here, passages which are, for instance, spoken in Russian are still rendered in English but might feature some Russian words in transliteration, and here and there we find expressions in German and French.

Martin Edelweiss, the novel’s protagonist, is part-Swiss (hence the name) but raised by Russian-born parents in a Nabokovian Anglophile home. Like Nabokov he speaks Russian, English and French but, we are told, in his French he has a “British accent” (42), an “английский акцент” (52). This annoys his Swiss uncle Henry, who

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<sup>139</sup> My translation.

<sup>140</sup> Literally, *Подвиг* means “feat,” “exploit” or “heroic deed.”

declares “Это дурно. Мы переменим все это” (52), “That is bad. We’ll have to change all that” (42). It annoys Martin too. When, towards the end of the novel, Martin travels by train to the South of France, he speaks to a Frenchman with whom he shares a train car. In the original Russian version we read “Да, чувствуется юг, — ответил Мартын” (“‘Yes, one feels the south,’ answered Martin”) (177),<sup>141</sup> which is understood from the context to be said in French. This becomes in the English version: ““‘Oui, on sent le sud,’ answered Martin” (153), giving the French where the original renders the phrase in Russian.

In the English translation, this French sentence later recurs. Because of his pronunciation, the Frenchman immediately guesses that Martin must be a foreigner. After the Frenchman falls asleep, Martin contemplates his accent: “Yes, he did believe I was English. *Ong sahng le soude*. Like this I shall travel north, exactly like this” (156). Piqued that he was found out so easily (when Martin asks the Frenchman how he guessed Martin was not French, the Frenchman answered: “It was not very hard” (154)), he exaggerates his English pronunciation of the French sentence. In the Russian original, this is entirely left out. Here, instead, Martin thinks: “А всё-таки он повéрил, что я англичанин. И вот так я буду ехать на северъ, вот так.” “But all the same, he believed I was English. And like this I will go North, like this” (180).<sup>142</sup> As in *Король, дама, валет*, the play on pronunciation is entirely omitted in the original Russian novel.

In another scene from the novel, when Martin, like Nabokov, is studying at Cambridge, there occurs a multilingual scene that in the Russian original is rendered entirely in Russian. Martin gives a small party in his room and among the many Russian

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<sup>141</sup> My translation.

<sup>142</sup> My translation.

speakers present there is one Englishman, Martin's close friend Darwin. He does not speak Russian, but Martin and his friends occasionally forget this:

а когда, по другому случаю, Мартын употребил слово 'угробить,' Мун рассердился и крикнул, что такого слова по-русски нет и быть не может. 'Я его слышал, его знают все,' – робко проговорил Мартын, и его поддержала Соня [...]. 'Русское словообразование, рождение новых слов,' – сказал Мун, обернувшись вдруг к улыбающемуся Дарвину, – кончилось вместе с Россией; то есть два года тому назад. Все последующее – блатная музыка.' 'Я по-русски не понимаю, переведите' – ответил Дарвин. 'Да, мы все время сбиваемся,' – сказала Зиланова. – 'Это нехорошо. Пожалуйста, господа, по-английски' (79).

In Nabokov's English translation, the whole scene is rendered in English, but, as throughout the translation, Russian words are scattered here and there, probably to make the reader aware that it is supposed to be in Russian:

On another occasion, when Martin used the colloquialism *ugrobil* (bumped off), Moon grew angry and shouted that such a word did not and could not exist in Russian. 'I've heard it, everybody knows it,' Martin said meekly, and was sustained by Sonia [...] 'Russian wordbuilding, the birth of neologisms,' said Moon, suddenly turning to the smiling Darwin, 'ended together with Russia, that is, two years ago. Everything subsequent is *blatnaya muzika* (thieves' lingo).' 'I don't understand Russian, please translate,' replied Darwin. 'Yes, we keep drifting into it,' said Mrs. Zilanov. 'That's not nice. English, please, everyone' (66).

Thus, where the translation manages to provide something of the international, multilingual situation of the party and gives us a bit of Russian flavor, the original Russian does not do this. The English is rendered in Russian, without any markers of "Englishness."

The translations of these two novels seem influenced by Nabokov's later American multilingual mode. Jane Grayson has written that Nabokov's later translations

all “bear the stamp” of his “mature English style” (12),<sup>143</sup> and although she is referring to the fact that these later translations are “more ribald, more blatantly, if humorously, vulgar” (112), it is obviously true also in a linguistic sense. Yet in the Russian originals, we find no multilingual interference, no play on accent or pronunciation, no foreign words – the Russian is kept “pure.”

That is, on the surface it is kept pure. A closer look shows that things might be slightly more complex than that. Many émigré critics of Nabokov’s Russian works had noted the ‘non-Russian,’ ‘foreign’ qualities of these novels. They observed (and sometimes protested) that Nabokov’s works were modelled after German or French examples, or that they could well have been published in any French magazine (as opposed to the Russian émigré journal *Sovremennye Zapiski*, for instance, where some of Vladimir Sirin’s novels were serialized.)<sup>144</sup> Although these critics referred to Nabokov’s topics, style and attitude rather than to any foreign quality in his use of Russian, an article published in 1977, “A Linguistic Study of Nabokov’s Russian Prose” by Alexander D. Nakhimovsky, shows that his use of Russian in these novels was “unorthodox” too. Nakhimovsky demonstrates that many of what he calls Nabokov’s “stylistic oddities” (78) and “atypical” neologisms (79) are odd and atypical because they are “formed from English models” (78). My Russian was not native enough to have noticed it myself, but after looking up all the examples Nakhimovsky gives, I have been able to verify that he is absolutely right.

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<sup>143</sup> Jane Grayson’s *Nabokov Translated* is an old study (1977), but it is still the most thorough, concrete and convincing examination of Nabokov’s translations from and into Russian to date.

<sup>144</sup> In a bitter review which appeared in *Chisla* in 1930, Georgy Ivanov writes: “В ‘Короле, даме, валете’, старательно скопирован средний немецкий образец. В ‘Защите Лужина’ – французский,” “In *King, Queen, Knave* the average German model is diligently copied. In *The Luzhin Defense* – the French model is.” Similarly, Mikhail Osorgin wrote of *King, Queen, Knave* that it was a “талантливый роман, который мог появиться на любом языке,” “a talented novel that could have appeared in any language.” (Quoted in Grayson, p. 3, my own translations).

Nabokov created neologisms using English words, which result in non-existent Russian words. In *Podvig* we find, for instance, “тубочки” (14) (*tubocku*), for “tube” instead of тубик or, “колледжской кантины” (79) (*kolledzskaja kantina*) “college canteen,” Russianizing the English word canteen instead of using the Russian equivalent, столовая, or “покикивала” (129) (*pokikivala*), “kicked around,” taking the English “kick” and conjugating it as if it were Russian. None of these words can be found in a Russian dictionary.

Nabokov goes further than just playing with English words here and there. Nakhimovsky explains: “In English, it is possible to take an entire phrase and place it in front of a noun, thereby creating a compound modifier” (80). In Russian, this is not done, but in Nabokov’s Russian it is. Thus, in *Дар (Dar)*, *The Gift*, we find the sentence: “От стихов она требовала только ямщикнегонилошадейности” (86), “From poetry she demanded only coachman-don’t-chase-the-horses-ness” (Nakhimovsky 80), and in *Отчаяние (Otchayanie)*, *Despair*, we read “квартиру в новом доме, выдержанную в современном коробочно-обжужлю-пространство-бесфинтифлюшечном стиле” (26), “that flat of ours, in one of those new-fangled houses built in the modern, boxlike space-cheating, let-us-have-no-nonsense-style” (Nakhimovsky 80).

Other times, Nabokov made multilingual puns of the kind that are easily missed and only noticeable to readers who know English. When, in *Приглашение на Казнь (Priglasenie na Kazn’)*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, the jailor complains to Cincinnatus “А то все: гордость, гнев, глум” (50), “he is always haughty, angry, snide” (Nakhimovsky 80), those who know English might see in “глум” (*glum*) also the English “glum,” thus adding an extra layer of meaning. Or Nabokov translates English

expressions in to Russian, so that someone will have a “уменьшившийся голос” (*Приглашение на Казнь* 52), a “small voice,” and another character dreams of “личико часов” (“Весна в Фиальте” (“Vesna v’ Fialte,” “Spring in Fialta”) 236), the “face of the clock,” creating combinations that are unexpected in Russian. Nakhimovsky explains that although in Russian it is possible to “понизить голос,” “lower a voice,” “the idea of giving a voice geometric proportions is new, and thus the image of a shortened, contracted, compressed voice is unusually bright and fresh,” as is the concept of “the clock’s physiognomy” (82).

Thus, where Beckett applied a typically French form of language play to English in *Watt*, utilizing the innate differences between English and French, Nabokov innovates his Russian by employing patterns, combinations and word renderings from English that are easily missed because they “are few and sound very natural in the Russian text” (85). Where Nabokov’s later English excels in the creation of, often multilingual, puns (we will see this in the *Ada* discussion below) his Russian engages in a subtler form of language play. This might in part be because of intrinsic differences between Russian and English, but it could also have another explanation.

In his manner of describing Nabokov’s “stylistic oddities,” the language of Nakhimovsky’s article points towards a possible origin of Nabokov’s desire to write “pure” Russian. On the one hand, Nakhimovsky appreciates Nabokov’s linguistic inventiveness. In discussing Nabokov’s neologism “разоем,” (“gazoem”), for example, “gastank,” he writes that it is “an excellent word which Russian should have adopted in place of the ugly borrowing *gazgol’der*” (79), a Russianizing of the English “gasholder.” However, at the same time he continuously refers to Nabokov’s innovations as

“violations” (78); “examples of deviation from norms of usage” (81); “violations of norms of language” (81); “unlawful combinations” (82) et cetera, and in this respect it is significant that he prefers Nabokov’s more Russian sounding “gazoem,” formed “on the model of *vodoem* ‘resevoir,’” over the English borrowing “*gazgol’der*.” This seems to betray a strong desire for a “pure” form of Russian, shared by the critics who found Nabokov too “foreign.” It is shared as well by Nabokov’s schoolteachers: in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov relates how, at Tenishev high school in St. Petersburg, he was berated for “peppering my Russian papers with English and French terms, which came natural to me” (*SM* 144). These negative attitudes towards the multilingual interference of a bilingual’s speech (and of a bilingual author’s writing) are, as we saw in chapter one, common – where “Mr Joyce” was censured for “writing foreign English,”<sup>145</sup> Mr Nabokov was scolded for writing foreign Russian (but wait till you see what he does to English!)

Yet the addition Nabokov makes to his recollection, that using English and French in his Russian essays, “came natural” to him, is important: for a bilingual, code-switching and playing with the different languages one knows, are a completely natural way of speaking. In the previous chapters we have seen that bilinguals can never completely “switch off” one of their languages when speaking (or writing) in another, and therefore language mixing “affects practically everyone who is in contact with more than one language or dialect” (Gardner Chloros 4).

Indeed, it seems to have been the natural way of speaking as Nabokov grew up as well. Where his Russian school papers were peppered with English and French, his English memoir is peppered with words, sentences and expressions Russian and French,

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<sup>145</sup> Cf. Fritz Senn’s article “Mr Joyce Is Writing Foreign English.”



reflecting the way his family used language. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov remembers (and probably embellishes somewhat) a conversation that provides us with a good picture of how languages were mixed in his family:

I soon noticed that *any* evocation of the feminine form would be accompanied by the puzzling discomfort already familiar to me. I asked my parents about it (they had come to Berlin to see how we were getting along) and my father ruffled with the German newspaper he had just opened and replied in English (with the parody of a possible quotation – a manner of speech he often adopted in order to get going): ‘That, my boy, is just another of nature’s absurd combinations, like shame and blushes, or grief and red eyes.’ ‘*Tolstoy vient de mourir*,’ he suddenly added, in another, stunned voice, turning to my mother. ‘*Da chto ti* [something like ‘good gracious’]!’ she exclaimed in distress, clasping her hands in her lap. ‘*Pora domoy* [Time to go home],’ she concluded, as if Tolstoy’s death had been the portent of apocalyptic disasters (162).

Yet in school, this for Nabokov natural way of speaking and writing was clearly not appreciated.<sup>146</sup>

Here, it is important to emphasize Nabokov’s multilingual upbringing.

Although, as we have seen, he was not quite a native speaker of English, he was,

Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour reminds us, not a *monolingual* speaker “of either English or Russian” (Klosty Beaujour, “Bilingualism” 42). He was, as he described himself,

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<sup>146</sup> Although Russian aristocratic families tended to be bilingual in Russian and French and traditionally interspersed their Russian freely with French (see Tolstoy, for instance), this habit became less accepted as Nabokov grew up, under influence of growing Russian nationalism in the years leading to the Revolution. Nabokov’s Russian tutor Lenski is an apt example of this changing attitude: “While venerating my father, Lenski could not quite stomach certain aspects of our household, such as footmen and French, which last he considered an aristocratic convention of no use in a liberal’s home.” (*SM* 90) This led to wonderfully funny dinner confrontations between Lenski and the Nabokov’s French tutor “Mademoiselle,” whose native language, according to her, he refuses to understand: “Mademoiselle decided that if Lenski answered her point blank questions only with short grunts (which he tried to Germanize for want of a better language), it was not because he could not understand French, but because he wished to insult her in front of everybody. I can hear and see Mademoiselle requesting him in dulcet tones, but with an ominous quiver of her upper lip, to pass the bread; and, likewise, I can hear and see Lenski Frenchelessly and unflinchingly going on with his soup; finally, with a slashing ‘*Pardon, monsieur*,’ Mademoiselle would swoop right across his plate, snatch up the breadbasket, and recoil again with a ‘*Merci!*’ so charged with irony that Lenski’s downy ears would turn the hue of geraniums. ‘The brute! The cad! The Nihilist!’ she would sob later in her room” (90).

In *Ada*, trilingual conversations become the wool with which the novel is knit. Here, not one single conversation takes place in just one language, and one would be hard-pressed to find a page without Russian and French “peppering” the English.

“bilingual as a baby (Russian and English)” (*SO* 5) and, some years later, when at the age of five French was added to the mix, he became “a perfectly normal trilingual child” (*SO* 43).<sup>147</sup> His childhood multilingualism, the code-switching prevalent in his home, and the metalinguistic awareness that accompanied it,<sup>148</sup> left permanent marks on his writing style, on his use of language – even, as we saw, on the Russian he so desperately tried to keep “pure.” It is as if the multilingual energy driving all his writing could be suppressed only up to a point, something of which he was aware himself: describing, in *Speak, Memory*, the “polished and rather sterile Russian poems” he wrote at Cambridge, he writes: “It would have horrified me at the time to discover what I see so clearly now, the direct influence upon my Russian structures of various contemporaneous (‘Georgian’) English verse patterns that were running about my room and all over me like tame mice” (*SM* 205). Naturally, it were not just English verse patterns that ran about him like tame mice, but the English language that surrounded him as well.

Thus, there is a tension between his “natural,” multilingual way of using language and the “pure,” monolingual use that his surroundings, schoolteachers and literary critics, demanded – a demand he seems to have internalized while still writing in Russian. This changes when he starts to write in English. Since English was not his mother tongue (and not his mother’s tongue either), he did not feel the same sense of loyalty towards its monolingual rules. Writing in English, nothing compelled him to keep the language “pure,” he was not plagued by monolingual qualms regarding linguistic purity.

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<sup>147</sup> What Nabokov here means of course, is that he was not normal at all, but very special. He most certainly did not see himself as normal, witness for instance an interview with Henri Jaton from 1963 in which he observed that he was born “a precocious genius, a *Wunderkind*” (quoted in Boyd, *RY* 52).

<sup>148</sup> Klosty Beaujour too draws attention to the awareness Nabokov must have had, from a very young age, “of the inherent separability of sign and referent” (“Bilingualism” 37).

There was another difference as well. In Berlin, where he wrote his Russian novels, he lived, as we have seen, an almost completely Russian life, sealed off from the German surrounding him through his lack of competence in the language. In America, on the contrary, he lived a full bilingual life. The language he spoke with Véra and their son Dimitri was always Russian: “Russian – liberally sprinkled with English or French – would always remain their language of everyday communication” (*AY* 17). Before he retired from teaching in order to devote himself full-time to writing, he taught Russian language and literature in various American colleges – often *in* Russian – he wrote the occasional poem in Russian and later devoted much time to translations from and into Russian. Yet the language surrounding him was the English he learned “as a baby,” a language against which he could, for that reason, not inoculate himself. It was the language he spoke with colleagues, friends, neighbors, the language in which, Boyd tells us, he wrote his diary (*AY* 17),<sup>149</sup> and the language in which he decided, from now on, to write his novels was English.

Thus, he was engaged in a back and forth between Russian and English, and although, unlike Beckett, he never wrote a poem about the actual struggle for finding the right word among his two languages,<sup>150</sup> he did comment on his “captivity in the zoo of

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<sup>149</sup> Although the one picture Boyd shows of Nabokov’s diary is in fact in English and Russian both, which, considering the moving back and forth between Russian and English he did on a daily basis, makes perfect sense. Cf. Nabokov’s diary for September 16, 17 and 18 of 1954, between pages 226 and 227 of Boyd’s *American Years*.

<sup>150</sup> Nabokov did write a poem about his switch to English, a dirge for his “Softest of Tongues,” which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in December 1941:

To many things I’ve said the word that cheats  
 the lips and leaves them parted (thus: *prash-chai*  
 which means “good-bye”) -- to furnished flats, to streets,  
 to milk-white letters melting in the sky;  
 to drab designs that habit seldom sees,  
 to novels interrupted by the din  
 of tunnels, annotated by quick trees,

words” (*SM* 180) – echoing the Unnamable’s “prisons,” his sense of being trapped in language. Similarly, while he was working on his introduction to Gogol, he wrote about the difficulty of having to translate each and every quote he used from Russian to English, since “most of the Gogol material (letters, articles etc.) is not translated at all, and the rest is so abominably botched that I cannot use it” (*Selected Letters* 41). At the same time as he was engaged in his translations from Russian, he was writing the text of the book in English, and this “intense and rather devastating work” (*ibid*) caused him some difficulties: The enervating part is that the translations of Gogol I have to make require another section of the brain than the text of my book and switching from one to another by means of spasmodic jumps causes a kind of mental asthma (*Selected Letters* 42). “Mental asthma” might be Nabokov’s way of giving words to the “tip of the tongue phenomenon” so common for bilinguals. Likewise, describing the struggles he encountered writing in English, he noted that his English felt inadequate “when I need the shortest road between warehouse and shop” (*SO* 106), making literal the neural pathways that connect the different words in his bilingual mental lexicon.

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abandoned with a squashed banana skin;  
 to a dim waiter in a dimmer town,  
 to cuts that healed and to a thumbless glove;  
 also to things of lyrical renown  
 perhaps more universal, such as love.  
 Thus life has been an endless line of land  
 receding endlessly.... And so that's that,  
 you say under your breath, and wave your hand,  
 and then your handkerchief, and then your hat.  
 To all these things I've said the fatal word,  
 using a tongue I had so tuned and tamed  
 that -- like some ancient sonneteer -- I heard  
 its echoes by posterity acclaimed.  
 But now thou too must go; just here we part,  
 softest of tongues, my true one, all my own....  
 And I am left to grope for heart and art  
 and start anew with clumsy tools of stone.

Interestingly, when he first started writing in English, he forbade himself to do any creative writing in Russian (“in America, I stopped writing in my native tongue altogether” (*SO* 54)) – a decision that caused him immense pain,<sup>151</sup> but that he seemed to have deemed necessary in order to become fully fluent in English as a writer. As he became more confident about his English (and he became quite confident, in spite of the many remarks he made about the inadequacy of his English we saw above. Referring to one of his stories for the *New Yorker* in a letter to his editor, he writes: “*please* let us not have any unnecessary changes. Everything is crystal-clear in the story and my syntax is becoming a grammarian’s delight” (*AY* 127), and comparing his own English to that of Conrad, he writes: “Conrad knew how to handle *readymade* English better than I; but I know better the other kind. He never sinks to the depths of my solecisms, but neither does he scale my verbal peaks” (*NW Letters* 253)), he gradually allowed himself to write the sporadic poem in Russian.

In *Alien Tongues*, Klosty Beaujour asks whether in retrospect “the unhappy years of rejecting Russian were really necessary” (98). Her own answer to this question is, “*subjectively yes*,” “but *objectively no*” (*ibid*). However I think that it probably *was* necessary. He had spent decades crafting himself as a Russian writer and, as we saw above, his childhood English had become rusty. As a consequence, initially he needed all his literary energy to re-craft himself into an English writer.

Yet what he became was not so much an English writer, as a multilingual English writer. Once he allowed his multilingualism to come to the fore in his writing,

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<sup>151</sup> In a letter to Véra he wrote, for instance, that he felt “a terrible desire to write, and write in Russian – but it’s impossible. I don’t think that anyone who hasn’t experienced these feelings can properly appreciate them, the torment, the tragedy. English is in this case an illusion, ersatz ... But how much more than this I would like to write a book in Russian” (quoted in *AY* 52), and in a letter to Wilson: “the urge to write something is terrific but as I cannot do it in Russian I do not do it at all” (*NW Letters* 156).

there was no longer the necessity to keep his literary languages separate. The “hidden” or covert multilingual play with English in his Russian novels happens in full sight in his American ones. Thus, it could be argued that Nabokov’s “private tragedy” made his fiction infinitely richer. In his essay “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals” Edward Said draws attention to the “pleasures of exile” (377). Said refers to the “gloomy” view of exile of Theodor Adorno, “predisposed to being a metaphysical exile before he came to the US” (ibid). According to Adorno, for a man “who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live,” yet in the end “the writer is not allowed to live in his writing” (ibid). Although Said admits that Adorno’s pessimistic perspective is justified he adds that one may at the same time derive “some positive things from exile and marginality” (ibid). In the case of Nabokov, a positive thing he derived from his American exile was a certain amount of linguistic freedom, of which he had far less when he was writing in Russian. In English, Nabokov becomes, as it were, linguistically unbound.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Nabokov’s Russian never fully recovered from this move to overt multilingualism. As his English became more dominant, his Russian gradually became less so – his written Russian that is. When he started with his Russian translation of *Lolita*, he realized that his Russian was no longer what it used to be. “He wrote to [Roman] Grynberg that when he switched from Russian to English, it was like a champion ice skater’s switch from blades to rollers: “Now I am writing something in Russian for you, and the reverse transition, from asphalt to ice, is terrible” (Boyd AY 472) (Incidentally, about his literal switch from ice to asphalt as a boy, he writes in *Speak, Memory*: “I was a good skater on ice and switching to rollers was for me not more difficult than for a man to replace an ordinary razor by a safety one” (SM 160)). In an interview, he explained that one of the problems writing in Russian now posed, was that “the excitement of verbal adventure in the Russian medium has faded away gradually after I turned to English in 1940” (SO 106). Janet Grayson relates that in the afterword to the Russian *Lo*, Nabokov “comments with some poignancy that the strings of his instrument had ‘rusted’ through disuse,” and adds “This self-criticism seems justified. *Lolita R* is an ingenious and talented translation, but much of the language is indeed awkward, unnatural, and strongly influenced by English idiom and English constructions” (183). As with his “un-Russian” Russian novels, with the Russian *Lo* too, ‘soviet and émigré Russian readers have commented on the oddness of the language” (183). It seems that after all these years, it was no longer English that was an “illusion, ersatz,” but Russian.

### **Ahksent on Last Syllable: (Mis)pronunciation in Nabokov's American Novels**

In his American works multilingualism, pronunciation and the exile's relation with a new tongue become important themes. The attention to language and accent we see in the English translations of *Glory* and *King, Queen, Knave* and the covert multilingual play of his Russian novels explode in his English ones. Nabokov's (uncomfortable) awareness of his own Russian accent in English informs his representation of his characters, who are characterized by how they speak. Thus, the initial insecurity that Nabokov felt with regard to both his written and spoken English, his worries about the outsider position he occupied toward English, become a topic in his American writings, a way of turning what he perceived as a linguistic disadvantage that native English writers (such as Wilson) did not have into an advantage, inasmuch as it is precisely his complex insider/outsider relationship with English that allows him to play with language in a way that his native Russian did not.

Nabokov's metalinguistic awareness made him acutely conscious of the sound of language, of pronunciation, and of accent. Thus, the very first thing we learn about *Lolita*, on the first page of the novel, is how to pronounce her name: "Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" ( 9). In fact, the name occurred to Nabokov in large part because of its sound, as he explains in an interview:

For my nymphet I needed a diminutive with a lyrical lilt to it. One of the most limpid and luminous letters is "L." The suffix "-ita" has a lot of Latin tenderness, and this I required too. Hence: *Lolita*. However, it should not be pronounced as you and most Americans pronounce it: Low-lee-ta, with a heavy, clammy "L" and a long "o." No, the first syllable should be as in "lollipop," the "L" liquid and delicate, the "lee" not too sharp. Spaniards and Italians

pronounce it, of course, with exactly the necessary note of archness and caress (quoted in *The Annotated Lolita* 328).<sup>153</sup>

Lolita herself would not have been able to pronounce her own nickname in the way Nabokov demands, nor would she have wanted to; she would have dismissed this as European pretentiousness (which, of course, it is).

Nabokov places the same kind of emphasis on the correct pronunciation of his own name:

Frenchmen of course say *Nabokóff*, with the accent on the last syllable. Englishmen say *Nábokov*, accent on the first, and Italians say Nabókov, accent in the middle, as Russians also do. Na-*bo*-kov. A heavy open “o” as in “Knickerbocker.” Incidentally, the first name is pronounced Vladeemer—rhyming with “redeemer”—not Vladimir rhyming with Faddimere (a place in England, I think) (*SO* 51-52).

And he would complain of Americans calling him “No-bow-cough. How ugly, how wrong” (*SO* 51). Similarly, Timofey Pnin, the main character from Nabokov’s novel *Pnin*, might have some difficulties with pronouncing American names (“Mrs. Thayer” becomes “Mrs. Fire,” for instance, and “Joan” is transformed into “John”), but Americans

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<sup>153</sup> Incidentally, Nabokov’s description of the inevitable way in which Lolita’s name came to him, the sense that there could not have been another name to fit the character of Lolita, is remarkably similar to Poe’s humorous explanation, in “The Philosophy of Composition,” of how he came to choose the word “nevermore” in “The Raven”: “The question now arose as to the character of the word. Having made up my mind to a refrain, the division of the poem into stanzas was of course a corollary, the refrain forming the close to each stanza. That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis, admitted no doubt, and these considerations inevitably led me to the long o as the most sonorous vowel in connection with r as the most producible consonant. The sound of the refrain being thus determined, it became necessary to select a word embodying this sound, and at the same time in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had pre-determined as the tone of the poem. In such a search it would have been absolutely impossible to overlook the word “Nevermore.” In fact it was the very first which presented itself.” (Poe 226) In this light, it is interesting to note that “nevermore” was one of the very first English words that Pnin knew before he came to the ‘soedinyonnie Shtatī (the United States) (*Pnin* 11). Poe’s account is humorous yet aims at the serious; Nabokov’s account is serious, yet aims at the humorous. Thus, these two very different American writers meet in these two words, “Lolita” and “nevermore.” (Incidentally (or not), one the “not very helpful odds and ends” that comprise Pnin’s English as he arrives in the USA, is “nevermore” (14)).



fare no better with his own. To his landlady John, I mean Joan, Pnin's name sounds like a "preposterous little explosion" (32), Mr. Sheppard, another landlord, calls him "Dr. Neen" (107), and Judith Clyde, who has the honor of introducing Pnin as he is about to deliver his famous Cremona lecture, doesn't quite know what to make of it: "Tonight we have here I am proud to say, the Russian-born, and citizen of this country, Professor — now comes a difficult one, I am afraid — Professor Pun-neen. I hope I have it right" (26). She has not, as Nabokov explains in another interview:

The "p" is sounded, that's all. But since the "p" is mute in English words starting with "pn," one is prone to insert a supporting "uh" sound—"Puh-nin"—which is wrong. To get the "pn" right, try the combination "Up North," or still better "Up, Nina!," leaving out the initial "u." Pnorth, Pnina, Pnin. Can you do that? ... That's fine" (*SO* 52).

This explication is echoed in *Pale Fire*, where Pnin returns as head of the "bloated Russian department" (155). Here, some of Pnin's colleagues speculate on the correct pronunciation of his name:

'You do know Russian, though?' said Pardon. 'I think I heard you, the other day, talking to—what's his name—oh, my goodness' [laboriously composing his lips]. Shade: 'sir, we all find it difficult to *attack* that name' [laughing]. Professor Hurley: 'Think of the French word for 'tire': *punoo*.' Shade: 'Why, Sir, I am afraid you have only punctured the difficulty' [laughing uproariously] (268).

As it happens, Hurley mispronounces the French word for "tire," "pneu," and will probably fare no better with Pnin's name.

In *Speak, Memory*, the introduction of Nabokov's governess, the farcical Mademoiselle (or 'Madmazelya', as the Nabokovs' coachman calls her) occurs largely through her language (*SM* 77), through her want of Russian and her comical pronunciation of the one Russian word she does know. The first thing we learn about her

as she steps off the train at ‘the little Siverski station’, fresh from Switzerland, is the following:

Her Russian vocabulary consisted, I know, of one short word, the same solitary word that years later she was to take back to Switzerland. This word, which in her pronunciation may be phonetically rendered as ‘giddy-eh’ (actually it is *gde* with *e* as in ‘yet’), meant ‘Where?’ And that was a good deal. Uttered by her like the raucous cry of some lost bird, it accumulated such interrogatory force that it sufficed for all her needs. ‘Giddy-eh? Giddy-eh?’ she would wail, not only to find out her whereabouts but also to express supreme misery: the fact that she was a stranger, shipwrecked, penniless, ailing, in search of the blessed land where at last she would be understood (*SM* 77).

The poor mademoiselle is an object of ridicule solely because of her language, derided by Nabokov for the type of slip in pronunciation that he is so anxious to avoid in his own English.

In like manner, the only thing we know about *Pale Fire*’s Conmal, “the great translator of Shakespeare” (75-76), is that he does not speak English. In fact, his knowledge of the English language is so meagre that the first and only trip he takes to England causes a severe depression: “he could not understand the language, and so went back to bed for another year” (286) When a “callous Academician” has the audacity to doubt Conmal’s questionable Shakespeare translations, he is “severely reprimanded by Conmal in an extraordinary sonnet composed directly in colourful, if not quite correct English.” “I am not slave! Let be my critic slave / I cannot be. And Shakespeare would not want thus” (286). The final words he utters on his deathbed are both terribly sad and highly humorous: “*Comment dit-on ‘mourir’ en anglais?*” (285).

In *Ada*, the butt of many language jokes is Marina Veen, one of the few main characters in the novel who is not fluently trilingual, preferring Russian to English and French, and Russianizing the little French and English she does know. As such, she is the

object of much merry mimicry for Ada and Van. Here, for instance:

‘*Chto vispalsya, Vahn* (well, slept your fill, Vahn)?’ said Ada, beautifully mimicking her mother’s voice, as she continued in her mother’s English: ‘By your appetite, I judge. And, I think, it’s only the first *brekfest*.’  
‘Okh,’ grumbled Van, ‘my kneecaps! That bench was cruel. And I am *hongry*.’

Marina fares no better in French: “‘*Protestuyu!*’ cried Marina. ‘Yes, I’m speaking *seriozno*. I object to your giving her *kvaka sesva* (*quoi que ce soit*),’” (257) and here: “‘Vahn, dear,’ said Marina, who was listening with delight to the handsome young men’s vivacious and carefree prattle, ‘tell him about your success in London. *Zhe tampri* (please)!’” (271)

This emphasis on mispronunciation, on accent and on linguistic incompetence explodes in *Pnin*, which as a novel exists almost exclusively by virtue of Pnin’s broken English. Pnin’s accent, the “Pninian wild English,” becomes the key component of his representation.

### **A Search for the Viscous and Sawdust: Multilingual Pnin**

One of the first things we learn about Pnin is his fraught relationship with English. He may be able to “handle practically any topic” in the language of his adopted country and he is “proficient enough to use glibly terms like ‘wishful thinking’ and ‘okey dokey’,” he can even “interrupt his narration with the phrase ‘to make a long story short’” (14),<sup>154</sup> “but otherwise progress seemed to have stopped” (ibid). English remains “a special

<sup>154</sup> Although the long story made short tends to come out rather clumsily, as the narrator does not neglect to demonstrate to us, for instance here, as Pnin relates his life story to his new landlady “John”: “Well, to make a long story very short: habitated in Paris from 1925, abandoned France at beginning of Hitler war. Is now here. Is American citizen. Is teaching Russian and such like subjects at Vandal College [for Waindell College]. From Hagen, Head of German Department, obtainable all references” (33-34).

danger area” and his is “full of flaws” (ibid). A little later in the novel, the narrator explains the Pninian accent more elaborately:

The organs concerned with the production of English speech sounds are the larynx, the vellum, the lips, the tongue (that punchinello in the troupe) and last, but not least, the lower jaw; mainly upon the jaw’s overenergetic and somewhat ruminant motion did Pnin rely when translating in class passages in the Russian grammar or some poem by Pushkin. If Pnin’s Russian was music, his English was murder. He had enormous difficulty (“dzeefeecooltsee,” in Pninian English)<sup>155</sup> with depalatization, never managing to remove the extra Russian moisture from “t’s and “d’s before the vowels he so quaintly softened. His explosive “hat” (“I never go in a hat, even in winter”) differed from the common American pronunciation of the adjective “hot” (typical of Waindell townspeople, for example) only by its briefer duration, and thus sounded very much like the German verb “*hat*” (has). Long “o’s with him inevitably became short ones, his “no” acquiring for the nonce the rounded orifice of a British or Bostonian “o” in “not,” and this was accentuated by his Russian trick of duplicating the simple negative. (“May I give you a lift, Mr. Pnin?” “No-no, I have only two paces from here.”) He did not possess (nor was he aware of this lack) any long “oo;” all he could muster when called upon to utter “noon” was the lax “o” sound of the German “*nun*” (“I have no classes in after*nun* on Tuesday. Today is Tuesday”) (66-67).

And so, when his landlady Joan asks him what he is looking for as he rummages around the pantry one particularly sad afternoon, we may read the following exchange: “‘I search, John, for the viscous and sawdust,’ he said tragically. ‘I am afraid there is no soda,’ she answered with her lucid Anglo-Saxon restraint. ‘But there is plenty of whiskey in the dining-room cabinet’” (59).

The problem with Pnin’s English is not just his pronunciation. Describing the way in which Pnin composes his weekly lectures for Dr. Hagen’s symposium on

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<sup>155</sup> The Russian translation (not by Nabokov himself), keeps this play on accents in English by giving the English words in Pninian pronunciation, but in Russian, and so you have English pronounced with a Russian accent written in Russian: “У него были невероятные трудности (слово это на пнинском ‘инглише’ звучало как ‘дзиификуултсии’)” “He had enormous difficulty (which in Pninian ‘inglishe’ sounded like ‘dziifiicuultsy’)” (my translation). But of course, you have to know the English word “difficulty” to understand the humor of “дзиификуултсии” or the whole joke is lost. The translation also adds a joke by giving us the Pninian pronunciation of “English”: “инглише”, or “inglishe”, where the “correct” Russian word for English is “английский” or “angliski”. The original does not give us this little extra joke.

“Contemporary Continental Culture,” the narrator writes: “Professor Pnin laboriously translated his own Russian verbal flow, teeming with idiomatic proverbs, into patchy English” (15). This is exactly how he speaks as well: his English is translated from thoughts that are being formed in Russian. When, for instance, Pnin complains to his landlady that in his room “it blows from the floor, and it blows from the walls” (36) he copies, as Mary Besemeres has pointed out, the Russian impersonal syntactic construction into English (Besemeres 395). Pnin also tends to sprinkle his English with Russian style exclamations such as ‘very well!’, “of course!” or ‘sad!’, always with an exclamation mark. These translate ‘specific Russian *vosklitsaniia*’ (Besemeres 397), or cries, of *прекрасно*, *конечно*, and *жалко*.

There are countless more instances in the novel where Pnin’s English captures the accent, syntax and intonation of Russian. But in fact, on occasion it is not Russian that underlies Pnin’s English, but French. He uses ‘signification’ when he means “meaning,” Englishing the French “*signification*,” and he claims to speak in French with much more “facility” than in English (105), using the French “*facilité*” rather than the more idiomatic “ease.” When he questions Victor, the son of his ex-wife, about his grasp of the French language, we see Pnin’s flawless French: “but you — *vous comprenez le français? Bien? Assez bien? Un peu?*”, to which Victor answers “*Très un peu*” (105), butchering the French language as Pnin butchers the English. (Pnin’s response is “Regrettable, but nothing to be done” (ibid), using the English “regrettable” (arguably another Frenchification) as a *vosklitsanie*.)

Pnin’s fluent French shows a glimpse of another Pnin: a Pnin completely bilingual in Russian and in French. This Pnin is a stark contrast to the Pnin of the

“Pninian wild English” who is such a source of hilarity both to the reader and to Pnin’s colleagues at “Vandall College.” We get a closer look at this different Pnin when he visits Cook castle one summer. Here, an émigré acquaintance, the wealthy and successful Alexandr Petrovich Kukolnikov, assembles around him every summer a colony of Russian intellectuals. (And of course, Kukolnikov (“Cook”) is introduced by means of the sound of his language: unlike Pnin, he speaks “beautifully correct, neutral English, with only the softest shadow of a Slavic accent.” (116). Pnin has just learned to drive a car and when we see him behind the wheel he is described as “an idiot” in a “preposterous toy car” (112, 115). But as he reaches Cook castle, things change. Here, for the first time, we see Pnin speak perfect and elegant English—because it is really perfect and elegant Russian. Suddenly, his language becomes “graceful, dignified, and witty” (AY 275) and it becomes clear that Pnin is in fact anything but an idiot.

In a recent German play by Lukas Langhoff, called “Klassentreffen,” or “High School Reunion,” about second generation Turkish immigrants in Germany, one of the Turkish protagonists remarks: “Ich denke das mein Deutsch nicht ausreicht. Weil das Problem ist, viele intelligente Menschen denken das wann Mann mit Accent spricht, das Mann auch mit Accent denkt”<sup>156</sup> (“I always think my German isn’t good enough. Because a lot of intelligent people think that if you speak with an accent, you think with an accent”).<sup>157</sup> At Cook castle, it becomes clear that Pnin, no matter how lame his English, certainly does not think with an accent.

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<sup>156</sup> The writer Bert Keizer makes a similar observation when describing his Dutch accent in his newly acquired English: “Though [unlike Pnin] I didn’t shrink into a mere figure of fun, I certainly became ridiculous in unsought ways by having to plod along in this borrowed garb. Anyone who is not fluent in a strange language sheds about 30 to 40 IQ points; that’s quite a dive” (56).

<sup>157</sup> This quote is from notes I made during a performance I attended of “Klassentreffen,” in New York City’s P.S. 122 theater on 17 November 2010. I have not been able to find a print version of the play. The translation is my own.

His beautiful Russian is captured symbolically by his excellent mastery of croquet:

As soon as the pegs were driven in and the game started, the man was transfigured. From his habitual, slow, ponderous, rather rigid self, he changed into a terrifically mobile, scampering, mute, sly-visaged hunchback. It seemed to be always his turn to play. Holding his mallet very low and daintily swinging it between his parted spindly legs (he had created a minor sensation by changing into Bermuda shorts expressly for the game), Pnin foreshadowed every stroke with nimble aim-taking oscillations of the mallet head, then gave the ball an accurate tap, and forthwith, still hunched, and with the ball still rolling, walked rapidly to the spot where he had planned for it to stop. With geometrical gusto, he ran it through hoops, evoking cries of admiration from the onlookers (130).

If Pnin's English is as clumsy, as "slow and ponderous" as his driving, his Russian is as elegant, as dainty, nimble and effective as his croquet game. Yet a novel about nimble Pnin would have been a completely different book—less touching, and less humorous. Pnin's "wild English" makes the novel what it is; we need incompetent, American Pnin, trapped in his imperfect mastery of the English language. Pnin himself believes this is just a temporary state of affairs. When his colleague, professor Entwistle, greets Pnin by rattling off his "excellent imitation of Russian speech"—"*Zdrastvuyte kak pozhivaete horosho spasibo*" (36), untranslated by the narrator but meaning "hello how are you fine thank you"—and proudly relates how he was able to convince a group of Russians that he was a compatriot of theirs, Pnin retorts that in "two-three years" he too "will be taken for an American" (37).<sup>158</sup> Like his colleagues, who laugh uproariously at this, we know better: In English, Pnin will remain permanently handicapped. The fact that he does not realize this himself only adds to the fun.

*Lolita*, written just before *Pnin* (in fact, there was some overlap: Nabokov wrote

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<sup>158</sup> Interestingly, this echoes a remark Nabokov himself made to Edmund Wilson in an early letter. Commenting on a translation he made of some Pushkin poems, Nabokov writes: "In a couple of years I shall be doing that sort of thing much better" (qtd. in Karlinsky 43).

the first story about “a Professor Pnin” while still working on *Lo* (AY 225)) but published in the United States a year later, in 1958 (it was published in Paris in 1955 by the French publishing house Olympia Press, which specialized in “pornographic trash” (AY 266)), is not usually considered in discussions of Nabokov’s multilingual works, which tend to focus on *Pale Fire*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Bend Sinister*, and, in particular, *Pnin* and *Ada*.<sup>159</sup> In fact, *Lolita* is almost conspicuous for its absence in explorations of multilingualism in Nabokov’s writing. This is curious, as it contains not just an explosion of foreign words and multilingual puns, but is arguably Nabokov’s most linguistically complex and fascinating novel.

### **To Fondle in Humbertish: the Language of *Lo* and *Hum***

*Lolita* is a book in which language is a topic of direct address. Its protagonists, the vile francophone Humbert Humbert and his slangy American girl-child Lolita Haze, are defined by language to such a degree that the English language almost becomes a third protagonist. In his afterword to the 1958 Putnam edition of *Lolita*, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” Nabokov calls the novel his “love affair” with the English language: “After Olympia Press, in Paris, published the book, an American critic suggested that *Lolita* was the record of my love affair with the romantic novel. The substitution ‘English language’ for ‘romantic novel’ would make this elegant formula more correct” (316). Reference to a love affair at the end of a book like *Lolita* – where Humbert Humbert has just finished

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<sup>159</sup> Some examples of criticism on multilingualism in Nabokov’s works are: Antonina Filonov Gove, ‘Multilingualism and Ranges of Tone in Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister*’; Joseph Nassar, ‘Transformations in Exile: The Multilingual Exploits of Nabokov’s Pnin and Kinbote’; Juliette Taylor, “‘A distortive glass of our distorted globe’: Mistranslation in Nabokov’s *Ada*’; Mary Besemeres, ‘Self-translation in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pnin*’; and Rita Safariants, ‘Literary Bilingualism and Codeswitching in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Ada*.’



trying to convince his readers, “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury” (9), that his depraved dealings with Lolita also constituted a love affair – is automatically suspect. It seems to suggest that English is a nymphet to Nabokov, something to be seduced, a sordid business.

Like *Pnin*, *Lolita* is a linguistic event. As we have seen, the first thing we learn about her is how to pronounce her name and, as in *Pnin*, this attention for pronunciation sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Where in *Pnin* a large amount of the linguistic energy goes into the documenting of *Pnin*’s “wild English,” in *Lolita*, this energy is directed towards the recording of Lolita’s ‘schoolmarm’s slang” (114), her “wild words” (171). In fact, much of the research Nabokov did for *Lolita* concerned getting the language right. Brian Boyd describes Nabokov’s fieldwork:

He travelled on buses, noting down in his diary snatches he overheard: ‘she’s quite a kid,’ or ‘Listen, I met –,’ or ‘It’s a sketch,’ ‘It’s a riot,’ ‘It’s a panic.’ He took ‘one arm of a little girl who used to come to see Dmitri, one kneecap of another.’ He visited a school principal on the pretext of placing his little daughter. He took song titles from jukeboxes, and phrases from teen magazines, women’s magazines, home decorating guides, billboards, motel guest notices, Girl Scout manuals, and more overheard conversation (‘I have *zillions* of them,’ ‘she was loads of fun’) (*AY* 211).

Another source of linguistic inspiration might have been his son Dmitri. In a letter from 1945 he writes to his sister that Dmitri “flaunts American expressions (which are sometimes pretty crude) current among schoolboys here” (*Selected Letters* 59).

It is with obvious delight that Nabokov records Lolita’s teenage jargon, and his “research” paid off: Lolita’s language sounds remarkably “real.” Andrew Field notes that Lolita “speaks in an idiom whose purity has seldom been equalled in modern American literature” (328).

Humbert too takes pleasure in Lolita's slang. Although he professes not to – he refers to it as her “vulgar vocabulary” (65) and to the begetter of these Americana (“Wow! Looks swank!”) as his “vulgar darling” (117) – the care with which he records her expressions seems to belie his objections: “Oh, she's a fright” (41), “I must go now, kiddo” (42), “Cut it out!” (55), “revolting,” “super,” “luscious,” “goon,” “drip” (65), “Gee, that's swell” (72), “Yep,” “wait a sec” (114), “Lay off, will you” (133), “You got a flat, mister” (228), “All this noise about boys gags me” (187). Humbert notes how she calls him a “dull bulb” (118), a “lousy crook” (186), or “you dope” (208), and effusively expresses her displeasure with him: ‘swell chance ... I'd be a sap if I took your opinion seriously ... Stinker ... You can't boss me ... I despise you ...’ (171). Humbert seems as drawn to Lolita's “slangy speech” (41) as to her nymphet body – or very nearly so – and he notes them down in his chronicle with a linguist's precision – following in the footsteps of Dante, Joyce and Watt before him.

In order to ingratiate himself with Lolita, he occasionally ventures to emulate her language, though usually without much success. Here, for instance, Humbert tries to get her to be affectionate with him: “‘Come and kiss your old man,’ I would say, ‘and drop that moody nonsense. In former times, when I was still your dream male [the reader will notice what pains I took to speak Lo's tongue], you swooned to records of the number one throb-and-sob idol of your coevals’ [Lo: ‘Of my what? Speak English’]” (149). However, much as Humbert tries to speak her tongue, Lolita rarely comes to kiss her “daddum” voluntarily (150).

It is with a foreigner's ear for an alien language that Humbert, Paris born of mixed, old-European descent (he is part English, part Austrian and part French), records

Lolita's American slang. Like his creator, Humbert too is an exile, living his American life – and writing his memoir – in a new language. Humbert makes sure to draw our attention to the fact that English is not native to him. He refers to his “coy croaks of broken English” (109), his “horrible careful English” (280), or his “accent” which causes hotel clerks to enquire after his “dead wife's and dead mother's maiden names” (147). It also emerges from the reports of others. As Lolita likes to imitate Humbert's facial tick (in fact, Humbert discovers his “*tic nerveux* because cruel Lo was the first to mimic it” (161)), she also likes to mock his speech. When Humbert proposes they sleep in one room, the first night they spend together, we read the following exchange: “‘You are crazy,’ said Lo. ‘Why, my darling?’ ‘Because, my dahrling, when dahrling Mother finds out she'll divorce you and strangle me’” (119). Or, commenting on Humbert's notions with regard to their mysterious pursuer: “‘You should – ah – check them by – ah – keeping in touch with him, fahther deah,’ said Lo, writhing in the coils of her own sarcasm” (220), and a little later: “‘Your humor,’ said Lo, ‘is sidesplitting, deah fahther’” (ibid). From this we can gather that Humbert speaks haltingly (hence the repeated “ah's”), as a consequence of his speaking a foreign language perhaps, and with a slight (possibly affected, which would make it all the more fun to mock) British accent.

From Clare Quilty we learn that Humbert also has a noticeable French accent:

‘You have a funny accent, Captain.’ ‘Quilty,’ I said, ‘do you recall a little girl called Dolores Haze, Dolly Haze? Dolly called Dolores, Colo.?’ ‘sure, she may have made those calls, sure. Any place. Paradise, Wash., Hell Canyon. Who cares?’ ‘I do, Quilty. You see, I am her father.’ ‘Nonsense,’ he said. ‘You are not. You are some foreign literary agent. A Frenchman once translated my Proud Flesh as La Fierté de la Chair. Absurd.’ ‘she was my child, Quilty.’ ... ‘Oh, chucks,’ he said. ‘You begin to bore me. What do you want? Are you French, mister? Wooly-woo-boo-are? Let's go to the barroomette and have a stiff – ’ (296).

It seems Humbert's accent is contagious because it prompts Quilty to start conversing in French: "'Now you've done it,' he said. '*Vous voilà dans de beaux draps, mon vieux.*'" His French was improving," observes Humbert dryly (298). When, a little later, Quilty commences to talk "with a phoney British accent" ("Ah, that hurts, sir, enough! Ah, that hurts atrociously, my dear fellow. I pray you, desist. Ah – very painful, very painful, indeed") (303), we cannot but assume that he too is mocking Humbert.

This seems only fair. Humbert is relentless in his criticism of other people's speech. About the new love interest of his sad first wife, Valeria, we learn, for instance, that he has "an atrocious accent to his careful French" (echoing Humbert's own accent in his "careful English")<sup>160</sup> and punctuates his movements "with all sorts of mispronounced apologies (*j'ai demande pardonne* – excuse me – *est-ce que j'ai puis* – may I – and so forth)" (all in grammatically incorrect French) (28–29). Poor Charlotte Haze does not escape Humbert's scorn either. Not only does she insist, in imitation of Humbert himself, on punctuating her English with French expressions ("Is that *monsieur* Humbert?" (37), "surely, *chéri*, you underestimate the possibilities of the Humbert home" (82), or, in her pathetic love letter to "monsieur Humbert": "my dearest, dearest, *mon cher, cher monsieur* ... Go! Scram! *Partez!* ... The situation, *chéri*, is quite simple ... You see, *chéri* ..." and so forth (67–68)) but she pronounces it all wrong: "'Dolores Haze, *ne montrez pas vos zhambes*" (this is the mother who thinks she knows French)" (44) adds cruel Humbert, and later mocks her accent by greeting her tombstone with "*Bonzhur*, Charlotte" (287). Similarly, Lo's little friend Mona, whose speech is still more slangy than that of her friend ("How had the ball been? Oh, it had been a riot. A what? A panic. Terrific, in a word" (191)) is derided for her pronunciation of Balzac as "Ball Zack"

<sup>160</sup> It also echoes Nabokov's own remark that speaking with an accent is in "atrocious taste (SO 164).

(ibid). Humbert Humbert hears everything.

Like his spoken English, Humbert's writing is faultless but not native. First of all, there are the innumerable French words, expressions and sentences with which he sprinkles his language – the pages of the book without Gallicisms can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The French words remain untranslated, so *tant pis* for the reader who has no French. Humbert's incessant French drives Lolita "nuts" – as she might have said herself (266). When, for instance, Lolita brings home from school a French girl, Humbert states "I spoke French to her (much to Lo's disgust)" (190). Lo subsequently drops the "French kid." When she does not mock his French ("Ansooit," comes in quick reply to Humbert's "*Ensuite*" (114)) she tells him to switch back to English: "do you mind very much cutting out the French?" (243).

Why Humbert insists on using French incessantly is an interesting question. Michael Wood has pointed out that "none of these phrases expresses anything Humbert couldn't say in English" (112). But, as we have seen, one can switch languages for reasons other than incompetence or ignorance. In "Über den Gebrauch von Fremdwörtern" Theodor Adorno puts it like this:

Die Fremdwörter werden Träger subjektiver Gehalte: der Nuancen. Wohl entsprechen den Bedeutungen der fremden Wörter jeweils die eigener; aber sie lassen nicht beliebig durch diese sich ersetzen, weil der Ausdruck der Subjektivität in Bedeutung nicht rein aufgelöst werden kann (641). (Foreign words become the bearers of subjective contents: of the nuances. The meanings in one's own language may well correspond to the meanings of the foreign words in every case; but they cannot be arbitrarily replaced by them because the expression of subjectivity cannot simply be dissolved in meaning (287)).

The French words connote something to Humbert that the English words do not.

Humbert's use of French seems motivated both by a desire to hold on to his past and by a

wish to remind his readers and interlocutors that he is different; it is, as Wood has called it, a “signalling of strangeness” (112).

Humbert takes enormous pains to emphasize that he is an exile, a foreigner, that he is not American. Throughout the novel, he continuously reminds us that he is European. He describes himself as “a brand-new American citizen of obscure European origin” (105), “a polite European” (36), “an alien unversed in New England lore” (200), a “French scholar” (202), he mentions his “old-fashioned, old-world way” (124), his “polite European way” (161), his “Central European trunks” (56), his “European urge” (213), he remarks on the difference between American suburban streets where “a lone pedestrian is more conspicuous than a lone motorist” (288) and the sidewalks of Europe where “relaxing burghers ... strolled and laughed” (281), or asks an innocent suburbanite whether she does not think ““*vient de*,” with the infinitive, expressed recent events so much more neatly than the English “just,” with the past?” (290) (Probably not).<sup>161</sup>

Yet even without the constant French, we would not mistake Humbert’s English for normal – although it is hard to say exactly what to call it. Before meeting Lolita, Humbert imagines finding, somewhere in the New England countryside, an “enigmatic nymphet I would coach in French and fondle in Humbertish” (35), and “Humbertish” might well be the best way to describe Humbert’s English.

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<sup>161</sup> Humbert’s little comment recalls Jorge Luis Borges’ 1942 essay “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins” (“The Analytical Language of John Wilkins”), where Borges writes: “Todos, alguna vez, hemos padecido esos debates inapelables en que una dama, con acopio de interjecciones y de anacolutos, jura que la palabra *luna* es más (o menos) expresiva que la palabra *moon*. Fuera de la evidente observación de que el monosílabo *moon* es tal vez más apto para representar un objeto muy simple que la palabra bisilábica *luna*, nada es posible contribuir a tales debates; descontadas las palabras compuestas y las derivaciones, todos los idiomas del mundo (sin excluir el *Volapük* de Johann Martin Schleyer y la romántica *Interlingua* de Peano) son igualmente inexpresivos.” (“We have all experienced those endless discussions in which a lady, using copious interjections and inconsistencies, swears that the word *luna* is more (or less) expressive than the word *moon*. Apart from the evident observation that the monosyllabic *moon* is perhaps a more apt representation of such a very simple object than the disyllabic *luna*, there is nothing to add to such discussions; apart from the compound words and derivations, all the languages in the world (including the *Volapük* of Johann Martin Schleyer and the romantic *Interlingua* of Peano) are equally inexpressive.”

The prose of *Lolita* is a delirious mix of alliteration and assonance, multilingual puns and archaic expressions, curious rhythms and catching rhymes, creating an unheard-of language with a diction all of its own, an English that is as much a “signalling of strangeness” as Humbert’s use of French. “Tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate” (17), “Well, let us grope and hope” (50), “those amusing rumors, rumor, roomer” (ibid.), “I spend my doleful days in dumps and dolours” (43), “your four limpid lovely limbs” (192), “here shall John always stumble; there shall Jane’s heart always break” (211), “No postcards. No soap. Nothing. No comments” (212), “my dolorous and hazy darling” (53), “The movie may mollify her” (63), “mauvemail” (a less serious form of blackmail) (71), “a mediocre mermaid” (86), “a banked banker” (98), “Trims tums, nips hips. Tristram in Movielove. Yessir! The Joe-Roe marital enigma is making yaps flap. Glamorize yourself quickly and inexpensively. Comics. Bad girl dark hair fat father cigar; good girl red hair handsome daddums clipped mustache” (254) – there are millions (“zillions”) of examples of Humbert’s (and Nabokov’s) strange, sing-song-y, rhythmic alliterative language. When Humbert’s French neighbour Gaston Godin (whose “English was a burlesque” (181)), comes up with a rhyming description of what girls are taught at Beardsley school, “not to spell very well, but to smell very well,” Humbert adds: “as he put it with a foreigner’s love for such things” (177).

It is likewise with “a foreigner’s love for such things,” with a foreigner’s obsession with a new language (and with a bilingual’s metalinguistic awareness) that Nabokov, through Humbert, composes the delirious language of *Lolita*. The alliterations, rhymes and assonances show that it is a sound-based language, concerned more with phonetics and rhythm than with meaning, and this seems fitting for a multilingual

narrator, preoccupied with accent and pronunciation. It also seems fitting for a multilingual writer, equally preoccupied with accent and pronunciation. *Lolita*'s prose is written with a multilingual's ear for language.

### **In the Beginning was the Pun: Joyce, Nabokov, and *Ada*.**

The preoccupation with pronunciation and with the sound of language that we see in *Pnin* and *Lolita* continues in *Ada*, Nabokov's sixth novel in English. Here, it takes the form of an explosion of multilingual and, as I will show, often unintelligible puns. The novel is set among the Russian aristocracy (whose members were traditionally bilingual in Russian and French) of the imaginary and trilingual country "Amerussia" (governed by Abraham Milton) where the main characters are all, more or less, fluent in English, Russian and French.

The polyglot punning of *Ada* starts with its very title, which in full is: *Ada, or Ardor, a Family Chronicle*. "Ardor" refers to the illicit, life-long passion between the two main characters, Ada and Van Veen and to the country house where they met, "Ardis Hall." Yet it also implies the sound of Ada's name which, as the narrator tells us, is supposed to be pronounced "the Russian way with two deep, dark 'a's, making it sound rather like 'ardor'" (*Ada* 39). Furthermore, the name Ada sounds like the Russian "а да," "a, da" or "oh, yes," and furthermore connotes the Russian word for hell, "ад," "ad." Ada's aunt Aqua plays with this connotation in her suicide note, which she concludes with "My sister's sister who *teper' iz ada* ('now is out of hell')," with the translation added (*Ada* 29). "Ad" comes from "Hades," and Ada herself adverts to this etymological connection when she refers, towards the end of the novel, to "the depths *moego ada*" and



translates this herself as “of my Hades” (*Ada* 583)—the depths of my Hades, of my hell. The pun is continued in the name of the town next to which Ardis hall is built, “Ladore,” which sounds like “I’adore,” and in the name of the star of the movie *Hate*, Adorno (*Ada* 291).

The body of the novel continues in this vein, and almost every sentence contains complex, multilayered multilingual puns and plays on words from English, Russian, French, but also from German, Italian, Latin and even Dutch. In this regard, *Ada* is close to the multilingual explosion of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. Nabokov’s way of punning is remarkably similar to Joyce’s and there seems to be an obvious and very interesting similarity in their styles, which becomes even more interesting because Nabokov denies it every which way.

Nabokov did not like the idea of having been influenced by any writer, living or dead, but his denial of any Joycean presence in his works was particularly fierce. In interviews, he was often asked about Joyce as a possible and likely inspiration for his works, but he always firmly refused the possibility. An example of a typical exchange between Nabokov and an interviewer on the topic of Joyce goes like this:

Interviewer: What have you learned from Joyce?

Nabokov: Nothing.

Interviewer: Oh, come.

Nabokov: James Joyce has not influenced me in any manner whatsoever (*SO* 103).

Sure, like Joyce, Nabokov engages in excessive wordplay and his works, like those of Joyce, abound in multilingual punning. But, he claims, in Joyce the “real puns are in *Finnegans Wake*,” and since, as he claims, “I detest *Finnegans Wake* in which a cancerous growth of fancy word-tissue hardly redeems the dreadful joviality of the

folklore and the easy, too easy, allegory” (*SO* 102), and finds the book to be “a tragic failure and a frightful bore” (*SO* 151), “a persistent snore in the next room, most aggravating to the insomniac I am” (*SO* 71), he denies he could have been influenced by it. (Although actually, his insomnia makes him the perfect reader of *Finnegans Wake*: Nabokov might well be that “ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia” we find in the *Wake* (*FW* 120.13-14)).

The harder Nabokov insists that Joyce has had no effect on his works, the less convincing he sounds. After all, he has remarked repeatedly on his admiration for Joyce and especially for *Ulysses*, which he ranked the greatest masterpiece of the twentieth century. This is a particular honor, as Nabokov was hard to please and dismissed an astonishing number of what are usually regarded great writers:<sup>162</sup> Henry James is a fake (*AY* 218), Thomas Mann and T.S. Eliot are “big fakes” (*AY* 138), Joseph Conrad and Oscar Wilde are dismissed because they are “essentially writers for very young people,” Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* is vilely written and Faulkner produces “corncobby chronicles” (Moynahan 433). Works like these, says Nabokov, “have been mistaken for masterpieces by journalists suffering from delusions—exactly as ‘when a hypnotized person makes love to a chair’” (qtd. in Moynahan 433).

Moreover, as we have seen above, at the start of his career as an American novelist, he was not always confident about his English and found writing in English difficult. Yet, when one interviewer comments on the Joycean-style punning in *Ada*, Nabokov cuts him short and says: “I played with words long before I read Joyce (*SO* 151), adding in another interview that he read *Ulysses* “when I was already well formed

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<sup>162</sup> As he announced in an another interview: “I happen to find second-rate and ephemeral the works of a number of puffed-up writers – such as Camus, Lorca, Kazantzakis, D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Mann, Thomas Wolfe, and literally hundreds of other ‘great’ second-raters” (*SO* 54.)

as a writer and reluctant to learn or unlearn anything” (SO 103). This idea—that he was no longer susceptible to influence when he encountered Joyce—is one of Nabokov’s recurring defenses. When another interviewer asked him to comment on the importance that Joyce has had on his writing, Nabokov predictably says: “My first real contact with *Ulysses* [...] was in the thirties at a time when I was definitely formed as a writer and immune to any literary influence” (SO 71).

While one might wonder if there is such a thing as immunity to influence, there is something more interesting implied in this answer. As we have seen above, Nabokov might have been fully formed as a writer in *Russian* in the thirties, but he was definitely *not* formed as a writer in English. It was years before he wrote *Sebastian Knight*, his first novel in English (1941) and a full decade before he moved to the US and transformed himself into an American writer. Moreover, as we have also seen, Nabokov never overtly played with foreign languages in his Russian works. It is only in his American novels (and, to a lesser extent, in his English translations of his Russian novels) that he allows any kind of manifest multilingual interference. As Joyce was already widely recognized as one of the most important modern writers when Nabokov started writing in English, it seems very possible that Joyce, the master of the multilingual pun, inspired Nabokov in his more radical use of language.<sup>163</sup>

Nabokov himself draws attention to the similarity between his own way of punning and that of Joyce. In *Ada*, there is a reference to a “bleakhouse horsepittle.” In the endnotes, the annotator Vivian Darkbloom, a poorly disguised anagram of Nabokov’s own name, explains to the reader that “horsepittle” means hospital and that this is

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<sup>163</sup> In fact, he almost admits so much himself, when he remarks to an interviewer: “Oh yes, let people compare to Joyce by all means, but my English is patball to Joyce’s champion game.” (SO 56)

“borrowed from a passage in Dickens’ *Bleak House*” — where it is uttered by the orphan Jo (27). Thus, Darkbloom adds, this is “Poor Jo’s pun, not a poor Joycean one” (592). Even if it never occurred to the reader that this might be a Joycean pun, the denial certainly makes one begin to wonder.

Furthermore, Nabokov pays tribute to Joyce in most of his American works. In *Bend Sinister*, for instance, Nabokov’s first American novel, we find “the other rivermaid’s father,” who wrote *Winnipeg Lake*” (114) – with “rivermaid” constituting an obvious reference to the Anna Livia Plurabelle section of *Finnegans Wake* – and in *Pale Fire*, Charles Kinbote teaches “Finnigan’s Wake [to] rosy youths” (59). In *Ada*, Van Veen, who drives around town in a “jolls-joyce” (473),<sup>164</sup> mentions that he knows and likes, “Joyce’s poem about the washerwomen” (54), another reference to Anna Livia Plurabelle. Ada herself writes in the margins of the manuscript that “on fait son grand Joyce after doing one’s petit Proust” (169). Similarly, in *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert declares, “*J’ai toujours admiré l’oeuvre ormonde du sublime Dublinois*” (207). The sublime Dubliner is, of course, Joyce, and “ormonde,” a nonexistent French-sounding adjective, is a (Joycean) pun on “hors de ce monde” ‘out of this world,’ as well as a reference to the Ormond Hotel and thus to Joyce’s “Sirens” episode.

It is precisely this type of Joycean multilingual pun in which *Ada* abounds. Nabokov spoke disparagingly of the excess of puns in *Finnegans Wake* and would mockingly refer to it as “punnigan’s wake” (SO 102). Yet in *Ada*, he rarely lets slide the

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<sup>164</sup> Interestingly, Joyce makes the exact same pun himself in a letter to Lucia, where he writes: “Giorgio ha venduto il suo Rolls-Royce o Jolls-Joyce” “Giorgio has sold his Rolls-Royce or Jolls-Joyce” (*JLL III* 304, my translation). These letters were published in 1966; Nabokov worked on *Ada* between 1966 and 1968. Thus, technically, it is possible that Nabokov read this letter and used Joyce’s pun for *Ada*, but one can only speculate.

opportunity of making a pun, and the novel comes very close to being a type of “punnigan’s wake” itself.

As we saw earlier, *Ada*’s title itself is a multilayered, multilingual pun and I’ll give some additional examples of Nabokov’s punning within the novel. As Van Veen returns to Ardis Hall in 1880, he finds a group of girls admiring his rival, Percy de Prey; these girls are described as wearing “yellow-blue Vass frocks” (187). When pronounced quickly, “Yellow-blue vass” sounds like “ya lyublyu vas,” which means “I love you” in Russian (597).<sup>165</sup> Moreover, “Vas,” is also a reference to “Vass of Manhattan” (78), a pun on the American fashion designer Bill Blass (1922-2002), of Fifth Avenue, Manhattan. This type of wordplay annoyed readers like Edmund Wilson, who complained of Nabokov’s “lamentable weakness for punning” (*NW Letters* 50) and criticized Nabokov’s “punning way of rendering Russian into English phonetics,” which “looks outlandish to people who don’t know Russian, confusing to those who do” (i.e. Wilson himself) (*NW Letters* 49). This, however, did not deter Nabokov at all; he was never much concerned about what his readers might or might not understand.

Another example of a typical multilingual pun in *Ada* is the book that one of the Veen maids is reading, “a mystical romance by a pastor” entitled “*Les Amours du Docteur Mertvago*” (53). “Docteur Mertvago” is obviously a play on “Doctor Zhivago”: “*zhiv*” means alive in Russian and “*mertv*” means dead. Doctor Zhivago thus becomes doctor death—this is Nabokov taking a dig at Boris Pasternak, whom he did not admire.

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<sup>165</sup> Nabokov played on the similarity of sound in *ya lyublyu vas* and “yellow-blue vase” as early as 1941, when he gives it as an example of a self-invented pun in a letter to Wilson (Karlinsky 47). Later, in 1947, he used a vase as a prop in his first elementary Russian class at Wellesley: “On the first day of class, we came into the room. There were only three of us. On his desk there was a yellow vase with blue flowers. He asked us what it was, and we said, ‘Yellow blue vase,’ of course. He said to us, ‘That is almost ‘I love you’ in Russian [repeating the words to himself], and that is probably the most important phrase that I will teach you” (Proctor 25).

Similarly, Blanche, one of the maids at Ardis hall, comes from a village which “local Jokers” call “Beer Tower” (231). Beer Tower is a pun on “Tourbière,” the real name of the village (598). “Tourbière” in French means bog, which in Dutch means ‘veen,’ which is spelled exactly as the last name of Ada and Van, Veen. There are hundreds more such examples—*Ada* is a veritable multilingual pun machine—but the above will suffice.

Thus, *Ada* resumes the concern with sound and mispronunciation that we saw in *Pnin* and *Lolita*. While in *Pnin*, Pnin’s linguistic incompetence becomes a crucial aspect of his personality, in *Ada*, the language of both the narrator and of the protagonists is characterized by their excessive use of polyglot punning. At times this occurs to such an extent that it is as if Nabokov simply could not help himself: every possibility for a play on foreign words, every option for a pun, has to be used.

In the aforementioned afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov complained about having had to relinquish his “untrammeled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue,” yet the comparison between his linguistically conservative Russian works and his experimental, multilingual American ones shows that this relinquishing was a blessing in disguise. Perhaps his Russian was too docile, too untrammelled. Perhaps Nabokov was too much in charge of his language, and perhaps the language was too much in charge of him, inasmuch as his respect for the rules and regulations of conventional Russian did not allow him the freedom to break them, to experiment with sound and diction.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Beckett remarked with regard to his decision to switch from writing in his native English to writing in French: “The kind of work I do is one in which I’m not master of my material [...] I’m working with impotence, ignorance. I don’t think impotence has been exploited in the past” (Graver and Federman

148). Nabokov's feelings of impotence and ignorance concerning English, his painful awareness of his accent, of his limits in English, became, as it were, a literary goldmine. His outsider position with regard to the English language is what allowed him to create the virtuoso treatment of language in his American works. What Beckett sought actively, Nabokov found inadvertently.

## Epilogue

I have tried to show the particularity of bilingual writers, a particularity that starts at the level of their cerebral organization for language and works through to the level of the written page. A corollary of this argument is that bilingual writers handle language differently, a difference that cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the nature and extent of their bilingualism.

I think this perspective opens up a new way of reading texts by multilingual authors, focusing less on the political aspect of language and more on linguistic and stylistic features; or at any rate not omitting the second focus. In their complexity, their radical multilingualism and their experimental way of handling language Joyce, Beckett and Nabokov made for particularly suitable subjects of a study of bilingual writers, but there is a whole range of other possible subjects. One could study other multilingual writers of the modernist period, like Kafka and Conrad whom I consider briefly here, as well as, for instance, Jean Rhys, Italo Svevo, Eugène Ionesco, Henry Roth, Jorge Luis Borges, or Flann O'Brien. Yet more contemporary authors also come to mind. Junot Díaz for example, writing in a "borderland" between English and Spanish, or Emine Sevgi Özdamar, trapped between Turkish and German. Closer to my home, there is a whole new generation of multilingual Dutch immigrant writers, such as Hafid Bouazza and Abdelkader Benali from Morocco, the Ugandan Moses Isegawa, or the Persian Kader Abdolah, who have been surprisingly understudied.

For the future of the present study, I envision as well as a re-writing of the existing chapters, separate chapters on Kafka and Conrad. With regard to the Joyce



chapter I plan a more detailed analysis of sections of *Finnegans Wake*. The relation that I found in Joyce, between the attention to speech and pronunciation in the early works and the letters on the one hand, and the radical multilingual play in the *Wake* on the other is extremely interesting and I would like to explore it further. For the Beckett chapter, I plan to do more manuscript research hoping to learn, for instance, what the notebooks for Beckett's *Three Novels* reveal about his to and fro between English and French. I think it will be fascinating as well to study the next two volumes of Beckett's letters, as these constitute an important next chapter in Beckett's linguistic development. Concerning Nabokov, my additional study will focus on his Russian novels. I imagine that a comparative study of the language of, for instance, his first novel in Russian *Машенька* (*Mary*) and his last, *Дар* (*The Gift*) will yield interesting results that might throw new light on my current analysis of his works.

I hope that this dissertation will be the opening chapter of a larger research project on multilingual literature, on the “polylinguistic matrix” that constitutes the life and art of bilingual writers.

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