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THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

Rather than ask about the cultural politics of linguistic diversity, we should be asking: what are the cultural politics of *monolingualism*? Most of the world's population uses more than one language, but the monolingual paradigm remains dominant, leaving us with a paradox: multilingualism is (in real terms) more common and more ›natural‹, but is *perceived* (particularly in the global North) as being exceptional, strange, *un*natural. The monolingual paradigm continues to dominate educational standards, academic disciplines, publishing norms, and language education, so to write multilingually is to run against the tide in many ways, necessitating an inherently oppositional or resistant stance. Multilingual writers often feel the need to make clear statements and arguments justifying and explaining their supposedly ›unusual‹ linguistic choices, usually on explicitly political grounds. In Chinua Achebe's well known debate with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, for example, both writers play out the politics of writing in the coloniser's language, English, with Achebe defending his creation of »a new English […] altered to suit its new African surroundings.«[1] Salman Rushdie, meanwhile, describes himself as a »translated man«, arguing that much can be »gained« in translation, not least the political act of writing in a distinctly Indian English imbued with the words and cadences of Indian languages.[2] M. NourbeSe Philip uses multiple languages in her poem *Zong!* (2008) to evoke the »multicultural, multilingual« universe and »linguistic balkanization« of the slave ship.[3] Yoko Tawada, when questioned about her own literary multilingualism, goes so far as to challenge the perceived authenticity of the mother tongue, asserting the »artificial«, »magical« and translational na-

1 Chinua Achebe, The African Writer and the English Language, in: Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader, ed. by Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams, Hemel Hempstead 1993; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, The Language of African Literature, in: The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, 2nd ed., London 2006, pp. 263–267.

2 Salman Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991, London 2012, p. 17.

3 Marika Preziuso and M. NourbeSe Philip, On Fracturing and Healing the Conventions of Language: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip, 2016, https://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/interviews/fracturing-and-healing-conventions-language (16.1.2024).

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ture of *all* language.[4] I could cite many more examples. As a result, to write multilingually often seems more political and more unusual, but in fact we need to challenge the ideological position that leads us to believe the ›monolingual‹ as more ›natural‹. And how do we move away from a position whereby multilingualism is perceived as opposition to monolingualism? Monolingualism is a fiction, an ideological construct, an ›invention‹, to borrow Gramling's apt description.[5] We therefore need to move away from monolingualism as the norm against which multilingualism is defined. The concept of nonmonolingualism – which speaks to the *impossibility of monolingualism* – provides a way out of this conceptual impasse.

Yildiz conceptualises the »monolingual paradigm« and elucidates the inherently political nature of language choice and language use in literature. The monolingual paradigm rests on the assumption (still dominant today) that language and national identity are inherently linked. It assumes that each individual ›owns‹ a language which is bound to their cultural heritage, and uses the powerful and emotive concept of the ›mother tongue‹ to propagate the idea of ›one true language‹ that is inherently ›natural‹ to a speaker.[6] Yildiz focuses on German Romanticism as a key moment in the development of the monolingual paradigm, though its history goes still further back: the ideology of the ›naturalness‹ of monolingualism – as embodied in the concepts of ›native language‹, ›native speaker‹, and ›mother tongue‹ – developed alongside the emergent European nation states in the early modern period.[7] Language began to be seen as fundamental to kinship and nation, leading to further organicizing metaphors of language ›families‹ and ›trees‹ which, as Bonfiglio argues, »would also act to enracinate language, to frame it as a biological entity.«[8] Such organicizing metaphors function ultimately to produce a deep-seated and powerful notion of monolingualism as ›natural‹ that is hard to shake.

When multilingualism scholars talk about the monolingual paradigm, then, we are not merely talking about monolingualism in the sense of being ›in only one language‹ and of multilingualism as being ›in more than one language‹. Indeed, we are engaging with how language *per se* is perceived, and in particular

4 Monika Totten and Yoko Tawada, Writing in Two Languages: A Conversation with Yoko Tawada, in: Harvard Review 17 (Fall 1999), pp. 93–100, p. 95.

5 David Gramling, The Invention of Monolingualism, New York 2016.

6 Cf. Yasemin Yildiz, Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition, New York 2012.

7 Cf. Thomas Paul Bonfiglio, Mother Tongues and Nations: The Invention of the Native Speaker, New York 2010, p. 5.

8 Ibid., p. 94.

the powerful cultural construct that presents bounded, distinct national languages as inherently linked to their respective national cultures and national identities. So before we can even engage with linguistic multiplicity in literary texts, questions arise that unsettle so many of the assumptions that underlie our education and academic training: what is ›a language‹? How do we define a single ›language‹? (And should we do so?) What is the distinction between ›language‹ and ›dialect‹? How does the idea of a ›national language‹ relate to our study of ›national literatures‹, and how are languages manifest within those literatures?

All these questions are deeply political in that they ask us to re-evaluate the relationship between language and nation, language and culture, language and literature. It is especially hard to do this in relation to literature, precisely because literature has historically been central to maintaining, justifying and perpetuating the monolingual paradigm. Within Romantic cultural nationalist ideology, literature is seen as both growing out of and actively nurturing an essential national culture. Witness, for example, Herder's argument in 1767 about the reciprocal bond between a nation's language and its literature:

> Wenn also jede ursprüngliche Sprache, die ein Landesgewächs ist, sich nach ihrem Himmels- und Erdstriche richtet: wenn jede Nationalsprache sich nach den Sitten und der Denkart ihres Volks bildet: so muß umgekehrt die Literatur eines Landes, die ursprünglich und national ist, sich so nach der originalen Landessprache einer solchen Nation formen, daß eins mit dem andern zusammenrinnt. Die Literatur wuchs in der Sprache, und die Sprache in der Literatur: unglücklich ist die Hand, die beide zerreißen, trüglich das Auge, das eins ohne das andere sehen will.[9]

Herder acknowledges the extent of borrowing and mixing that occurs when foreign literatures are imported into a national language, but likens »eine Sprache, die ihre Literatur aus verschiedenen Himmels- und Erdstrichen, aus mancherlei Sprachen und Völkern her hat« to a »babylonischen Sprachenmischung«, a »Cerberus […], der aus neun Rachen neun verschiedene Sprecharten, […] herausstößt.«[10] Multilingualism thus is envisioned as a monstrous source of confusion.

9 Johann Gottfried Herder, Über die neuere deutsche Literatur. Fragmente. Erste Sammlung, in: Herder, Werke in zehn Bänden, vol. 1: Frühe Schriften 1764–1772, ed. by Ulrich Gaier, Frankfurt a. M. 1985, pp. 541–649, p. 559.

10 Ibid., pp. 559 f.

The writer, as ›naturally‹ or ›organically‹ linked to the culture of their nation, is seen to hold a privileged position (and indeed a responsibility) to counter that confusion and nurture the national language, but the monolingual paradigm goes further than this, often producing a conception of the *impossibility* of writing in (and by implication truly ›mastering‹) other languages. The idea of language as hereditary national ›birthright‹ – so powerfully enshrined in the concept of the ›mother tongue‹ – is inextricably linked to ideas of linguistic ›ownership‹: if a language can only be your ›own‹ through kinship and national heritage, then you can never fully ›own‹ any other language. This ideological position can create particular paradoxes for the colonial or postcolonial writer, where the ›mother tongue‹ may be the language of the coloniser rather than any language ›rooted‹ in the national culture. In the 1930s, W. B. Yeats recounts telling a group of Indian writers that »[n]o man can think or write with music and vigour except in his mother tongue«, and concludes that »I could no more have written in Gaelic than can those Indians write in English.«[11] The nationalist Irish Literary Revival used the monolingual paradigm to resist the violent British colonial imposition of the English language in Ireland, but that very paradigm also guaranteed the linguistic alienation felt by those writers for whom, like Yeats, their ›mother tongue‹ was not the language of their ›national culture.‹ Indian writing in English, particularly since the early twentieth century, has proven Yeats's statement to be false, often unsettling notions of linguistic ›ownership‹ in the process. Raja Rao, in his introduction to *Kanthapura* (1938), describes the need »to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own«, describing English as an »alien« language, but almost in the same breath undermining that statement: »I use the word ›alien‹, yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English.«[12] The monolingual concept of linguistic ›ownership‹ creates a tension in such statements: Rao attempts to challenge the monolingual paradigm and to promote more fluid bilingual modes of expression, but falls back on the tenets of that very paradigm (the distinction between one's »own« and an »alien« language) in order to do so. For Yildiz, the concept of »linguistic depropriation« provides one way out of this impasse by exploring and challenging the very

11 William Butler Yeats, The Collected Works, vol. V: Later Essays, ed. by William H. O'Donnell, New York 1994, pp. 211 f.

12 Raja Rao, Kanthapura, Oxford 1989, pp. v–vi.

notion of language as property.[13] For Phipps, the act of decolonising multilingualism must go even further, beginning with a rejection of language as property altogether: »A language cannot be owned; nor can its teaching.«[14]

Some of the most trenchant challenges to the monolingual paradigm come from colonial and postcolonial perspectives because the monolingual paradigm is itself inextricably intertwined with European colonialism. Indeed, the idea of the national language was harnessed for the first wave of European colonialism as »vehicle for and articulation of conquest.«[15] By the height of European imperialism in the nineteenth century, colonial powers had imposed the idea of the bounded language along with European ideas of the nation state across large swathes of colonial territories. Much colonial linguistics of this period was carried out by European missionaries, who imposed Christian ideological constructs on to the linguistic landscapes they encountered. As Errington, building on the work of Schutz, Mannheim and Herzfeld, explains:

> Primevalness and purity were convergent, overdetermined aspects of missionary language ideologies. The perceived primitivity of the communities they encountered resonated in the first place with Biblical narratives of (monolingual) Eden, and the theology of dispersal from (multilingual) Babel. Linguistic diversity within and across communities could be perceived in this way as a puzzling sign of barbarism […], whereas linguistic homogeneity in Pacific island communities summoned up paradisiacal images of noble, if savage, societies […]. By the same token, secular understandings of human and language origins […] helped to legitimize colonial efforts to reduce linguistic diversity.[16]

Assuming the ›naturalness‹ of monolingualism »helped Europeans grapple with bewildering linguistic diversity, which they could frame as a problematic, Babel-like condition to be subjected to regulation […] or balkanization.«[17] Nationalist and colonial conceptualisations of language paved the way for perceived hierarchies within colonial linguistics, whereby languages were judged as being more ›sophisticated‹ or more ›primitive‹ according to European colonial and linguistic standards. The colonial creation and promotion of lingua

13 Yildiz, Beyond the Mother Tongue, p. 40.
14 Alison Phipps, Decolonising Multilingualism: Struggles to Decreate, Bristol 2019, p. 7.
15 Bonfiglio, Mother Tongues and Nations, p. 81.
16 Joseph Errington, Colonial Linguistics, in: Annual Review of Anthropology 30 (2001), pp. 19–39, p. 27.
17 Ibid., p. 24.

francas at the expense of other languages, and the development of certain languages as ›national‹ languages were to have particularly lasting impacts.[18]

Although the overt tenets of colonial linguistics have since been discredited, their legacy endures: colonial ideology is integral to the history and continuing development of the discipline of linguistics. Errington highlights the colonial origins of comparative philology and of modern linguistics more generally.[19] Deumert and Storch signal the colonial means by which »certain knowledges were or are accepted or negated, were or are produced and administered, marginalized or removed from texts, curricula, and institutions« and how these »shaped – and continue to shape – linguistics.«[20] Particularly persistent are the »discourses of standardization and normativity« which »are inevitably inscribed within the bounded genre of grammar, which presents language as codifiable.«[21] Engaging with multilingualism thus necessitates a decolonial approach that attempts to untangle our understanding of language and linguistic diversity from the colonial contexts and assumptions that underlie the very basis of our linguistic and literary disciplines. Makoni and Pennycook argue that »it is what is seen as marginal or exceptional that should be used to frame our understandings of language«, and draw on creolisation as a key concept in the act of »disinventing« languages: »all languages are creoles, and […] the slave and colonial history of creoles should serve as a model on which other languages are assessed.«[22] For Canagarajah it is the »fluid and hybrid« forms of precolonial/premodern language, particularly in the South Asian context, that can provide a model for new understandings of language and new linguistic pedagogies.[23]

What are the implications of this for how we read linguistic diversity within literature? Despite the significant scrutiny of monolingual ideology within linguistics and, more recently, within literary multilingualism studies, the monolingual paradigm remains dominant within literary studies more generally. Yet

18 Cf. Joseph Errington, Linguistics in a Colonial World: A Story of Language, Meaning, and Power, Malden 2008, pp. 123–148.

19 Errington, Colonial Linguistics, p. 31.

20 Ana Deumert and Anne Storch, Introduction: Colonial linguistics – then and now, in: Colonial and Decolonial Linguistics: Knowledges and Epistemes, ed. by Deumert, Storch and Shepherd, Oxford 2021, pp. 1–21, p. 20.

21 Ibid., p. 6.

22 Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook, Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages, in: Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages, ed. by Makoni and Pennycook, Clevedon 2007, pp. 1–41, p. 21.

23 Suresh Canagarajah, After Disinvention: Possibilities for Communication, Community and Competence, in: Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages, pp. 233–239.

the way that we conceptualise language is absolutely central to how we read *any* literary text (and not only overtly multilingual texts). A sensitivity to the cultural politics of linguistic plurality allows us to see the restrictions and controls placed on writers within the literary marketplace, for example: the highly monolingual ideologies maintained by publishers restricts the types of literature that we have access to, and indeed much multilingual writing still reflects monolingual ideologies.[24] Every time we come across linguistic plurality in a text, we need to examine the cultural politics of that specific example. It is fairly common, for example, to find examples where languages are juxtaposed and combined such that they remain distinct, bounded, even ›foreign‹ within / to the text. Such forms of multilingualism often belie essentialist ideas about language and national culture, reflected in language which we might, borrowing Makoni and Pennycook's phrase, describe as a »pluralization of monolingualism«: they use multiple languages but still uphold the monolingual paradigm.[25] On the other hand, texts which at first glance might seem ›monolingual‹ can manifest rich and complex modes of linguistic interpenetration such that they destabilise and subvert the boundaries of languages, undermining our sense of any language as a unitary, ›rooted‹ and bounded structure, and prioritising heteroglossic modes of expression. Such texts could thus be described as *non*monolingual, as defined by Rath and adopted by Dembeck in this cluster of essays.[26] Ultimately, we need to scrutinise and question cultural nationalist notions of language and identity, resist the norms imposed by publishers and textual conventions, and find ways of moving outside of the monolingual paradigm in how we conceptualise language in literary texts.

24 On the relationship between literary multilingualism and print culture, see Brian Lennon, In Babel's Shadow: Multilingual Literatures, Monolingual States, Minneapolis 2010.

25 Makoni and Pennycook, Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages, p. 22.

26 Brigitte Rath, Speaking in tongues of a language crisis: Re-reading Hugo von Hofmannthal's »Ein Brief« as a non-monolingual text, in: Critical Multilingualism Studies 5 (2017), no. 3, pp. 75–106. Till Dembeck goes so far as to argue that »[t]here is no such thing as a monolingual text«, demonstrating the importance of acknowledging latent forms of linguistic diversity. Till Dembeck, There Is No Such Thing as a Monolingual Text! New Tools for Literary Scholarship, in: Polyphonie – Mehrsprachigkeit_Kreativität_Schreiben, 2017, http://www.polyphonie.at/index.php?op=publicationplatform&sub=viewcontribution&contribution=105 (16.1.2024).