

Hommage à Myriam Pereiro

A PLOT AGAINST POLYGLOTS?

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It used to be said of the great linguist Roman Jakobson (1896 – 1983) that “He spoke Russian fluently in six languages” (Actually, those were just his “lecturing” languages. He knew at least twenty others.). The implicit point of this paradox is, of course, that his performance in his multiple second languages was deficient in some way. How exactly we don’t know. Accent? Grammar? Turn of phrase? Suddenly, what we might mean by the everyday expression “to speak a language” is problematised and “to speak several languages” even more so. Take another example: Cardinal Giuseppe Mezzofanti (1774 – 1849), Vatican librarian, is credited (by the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*) with the ability to speak 50 languages, to understand another 20 and to translate 114. The obviously shaky nature of these statistics – did the good cardinal translate languages he didn’t understand? – is just further evidence that we are in very troubled waters here, with problems of the definition and measurement of linguistic proficiency exacerbated by questions about the reliability of the evidence.

Polyglots like Jakobson and Mezzofanti have always been a source of fascination, perhaps because, like champion athletes, they excel at doing something we all do more modestly so that we can appreciate and wonder at their achievements, but without being able to rival them. Language specialists and laypeople alike ask themselves whether there is a special “gift for languages” possessed by a lucky few, and it is this question which Myriam Pereiro explored in her balanced and incisive thesis on “La Bosse des langues” in which, more precisely, she compared everyday social representations and beliefs with more rigorous scientific approaches, an original take on the topic.

In the spirit of Myriam’s research – or at least curiosity as to what’s new in the field – I recently googled the term “polyglot”. I expected to find reports on developments in neurolinguistics and sociolinguistics and I wasn’t completely disappointed. And there were plenty of entries along the lines of “Ten tips for easy language learning”, some for free, others rather expensive. But I was really taken aback by the tone and contents of some of the general discussions, where I had expected very little movement at all. Instead of fond parents recounting that Hansel had produced his first words at six months or that Gretel was perfectly trilingual by the time she was three, I found myself in a space of often bitter contestation between, simplifying slightly, a group claiming to be polyglots and a group denying or denigrating their claims. In particular, I was shocked by the way in

which video recordings by self-proclaimed polyglots were aggressively rubbished and declared to be “fake”. Since the *Mélanges* is family reading, I will not reproduce the most egregious examples of vituperative prose, which would have made Donald Trump blush. A few representative titles will have to suffice:

Language Hackers and “Polyglots” are Full of Shit
The Dark Side of Polyglot Hype
Faking it: How People pretend to Speak another Language
Why There is a Huge Online Culture Accusing Polyglots
Polyglot Frauds
Polyglots or Polyglots?
Polyglots Mimic Talking Parrots
F*** you I hate polyglots
Bloody polyglot fakes

... and so on. When did this happen? When did a claim to speak several languages begin to call down such opprobrium? Of course, with the rise of the nation states and the identification of linguistic with national loyalty, bilingualism was sometimes regarded with suspicion. In nineteenth-century Britain, an army officer could be ostracised if he was caught speaking another language. The eminent historian, Sir Lewis Namier (1888 – 1960) though himself of Polish origin and polyglot, had this to say, hopefully tongue-in-cheek, but none the less on the basis of great political experience:

No man is lightly to be chosen as British Foreign Secretary who speaks any language but English; or at least, a man burdened with such accomplishments should be made to take a vow never to speak any other language. ... He is certain not to know every foreign language which matters; and if he is familiar only with one, he tends to develop an undue bias in favour of that particular nation. But if, worst of all, he prides himself on such knowledge, and finds pleasure in jabbering that foreign lingo, then he is lost and essential British interests are in jeopardy... Lord Salisbury knew French, but never talked anything but English to foreign statesmen or diplomats...

After quoting the above passage from Namier’s *In the Margin of History*, Peter Osborne observes:

Our current crop of foreign secretaries (David Milliband and William Hague are good examples) tend to be useless at foreign languages. But this has caused a problem that Namier, writing in 1938, could not have anticipated. Fundamentally, they only really understand American, and so tend to do whatever the USA wants (The Spectator Diary, 27/4/13).

But Osborne was writing pre- Boris Johnson, who, apparently does speak French, but who used his English as a journalist in Brussels to such effect that he was eventually

sacked twice (by the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*) for purveying what would now be called “alternative facts” that is, lies. He is widely regarded as bearing considerable responsibility for Brexit.

But to come back to those internet posts, here we have an informal group of people sharing a common interest, language and language learning, where one might have expected relations of mutual encouragement and respect. Is this aggressiveness and anger simply the negative influence of the Internet and the disinhibiting effects of anonymity?

Naturally, extreme claims are always subject to some skepticism. I'd be interested to know what the anti-polyglot crowd would have made of the following C.V. In 1866, a young Scottish widower working as a bank clerk in London applied for a post in the British Museum Library. Despite his lack of any formal qualifications, James Murray was able to state, honestly but with considerable ingenuousness, that

[...] I possess a general acquaintance with the language and literature of the Aryan and Syro-Arabic classes [...] With several I have a more intimate acquaintance as with the Romance tongues, Italian, French, Catalan, Spanish, Latin & in less degree Portuguese, Vaudois, Provençal and various dialects. In the Teutonic branch I am tolerably familiar with Dutch (having at my place of business correspondence to read in Dutch, French & occasionally other languages) Flemish, German, Danish. In Anglo-Saxon and Moeso-Gothic my studies have been much closer, I having prepared some works for publication upon these languages. I know a little of the Celtic, and am at present engaged with the Slavonic, having obtained a useful knowledge of Russian. In the Persian, Achaemenian Cuneiform, & Sanskrit branches, I know for the purposes of Comparative Philology. I have sufficient knowledge of Hebrew & Syriac to read at sight the O.T. [Old Testament] and Peshito [Syriac version of the Bible] ; to a lesser degree I know Aramaic Arabic, Coptic and Phenician to the point where it was left by Gesenius. (Murray, 1977:70)¹.

He didn't get the job (possibly because the Museum staff thought this too good to be true – “fake”?) but by the age of forty he was recognised as a leading light in the fields of philology and phonetics, contemporary cutting-edge disciplines centred on the University of London and the Philological Society. But it was not until 1879 that he was appointed as the third editor of the Oxford English Dictionary (‘the OED’), after negotiations that were immensely complex and long drawn out, largely because the professors on the Oxford University Delegacy were ignorant of and hostile to the ‘German’ scientific principles and methodology which Murray and the Society espoused. They were also suspicious and contemptuous of Murray's lack of formal qualifications and treated him like a servant

¹ This is a delightful family *mémoire-cum-history* of the OED by James Murray's granddaughter, K.M. Elisabeth Murray.

rather than a colleague, only recognising him as a full member of the University towards the end of his career, even though he had been granted numerous honorary doctorates abroad.

The history of the *OED* has been revisited recently by Sarah Ogilvie (2012). Ogilvie's scholarship is rigorous, entertaining and lightly worn. She shows herself to be a worthy member of the galactic team of the *OED*'s lexicographical stars with asides such as her reference to an eccentric colleague "who wore a different kilt for each Scottish feast and would sometimes email me in Klingon, the language of *Star Trek* (we bonded early on about Klingon morphology because I was familiar with the grammar of Mutsun, a Native language of North America upon which Klingon was based)" (Ogilvie, 2012: 63).

Sarah Ogilvie's mention of Klingon, brings us to a group of polyglots who have been unduly neglected: fictional characters. It is striking, for example, how often authors of utopian or dystopian narratives explain their protagonists' ability to describe and analyse their weird and wonderful worlds and to communicate with their denizens almost on arrival, by attributing to them a gift for languages. Lemuel Gulliver is an early exemplar of this expository strategy, with language also playing an important but varying role in characterising the nature and activities of each of the four societies he visits. Gulliver is given lessons: the Emperor of Lilliput

... gave orders that six of his majesty's greatest scholars should be employed to instruct me in their language ... and in about three weeks I made great progress ... during which time the emperor frequently honoured me with his visits, and was pleased to assist my masters in teaching me. We began already to converse together in some sort ... (Swift 1726:27).

Science fiction stories abound in just this kind of mechanism, at least in those works where the aliens don't already conveniently happen to speak English. And then there are various kinds of technological solutions to the linguistic question, such as Star Wars' C-3PO who (which?) is a humanoid robot character. Built by Anakin Skywalker, C-3PO was designed as a protocol droid intended to assist in etiquette, customs, and translation, boasting that he is "fluent in over six million forms of communication". Difficult to beat, although the concept of the Babelfish in Terry Pratchett's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* seems to do just that:

The Babel fish is small, yellow, leech-like - and probably the oddest thing in the universe. It feeds on brain wave energy, absorbing all unconscious frequencies and then excreting telepathically a matrix formed from the conscious frequencies and nerve signals picked up from the speech centres of the brain, the practical upshot of which is that if you stick one in your ear, you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language: the speech you hear decodes the brain wave matrix. It is a universal translator that neatly crosses the language divide between any species ... the poor Babel fish,

by effectively removing all barriers to communication between different cultures and races, has caused more and bloodier wars than anything else in the history of creation.

Despite the comic cynicism of the final part of this Wikipedia summary, the Babelfish has also inspired one of the most interesting recent books on translation, David Bellos's wonderful *"Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything"*.

Many people – native speakers of English in particular – seem to believe that the impressive spread of English as a lingua franca has made translation unnecessary anywhere in the world, or even in the next. The great escapologist and illusionist Harry Houdini spent much of the latter part of his life to debunking the tricks and techniques employed by mediums and charlatans to fool the gullible. On one occasion, the medium claimed to be in contact with Houdini's own mother and delivered a long message to her son. When she had finished, Houdini pointedly asked how it was possible that his mother, who had never spoken a word of English, was now fluent in that language. Unperturbed, the medium consulted the mother and reported back that she said it wasn't surprising, because "up here in Heaven, son, *everybody* speaks English!"

In his engaging and thought-provoking *Aliens and Linguists: Language Study and Science Fiction* (1980) Walter Earl Meyers quotes a parable of purism to strike fear into the boldest sociolinguist's heart. It is taken from Zach Hughes's 1974 SF novel *The Legend of Miaree*, in which humanity has reached the stars.

As the centuries passed, they began to notice variation in language, though it never reached the point where one man could not understand another ... "We are one people and the lengths we have gone to keep it that way, among them the enforcement of the standard regulations are for the good".

And those regulations are, to say the least, strict, as is shown in the scene where a university professor warns a student about his regional dialect, which he notes is a mark of provincialism. He continues:

"Provincialism leads to nationalism. On the isolated planet of Zede II, it [a dialect] was allowed to grow. Until, as one would cut out a cancerous growth, we eliminated it."

And the method for eliminating this upstart variety? Nothing less than the destruction of the entire planet. Now that's a language policy Darth Vader would be proud of ...

Mind you, history shows that in real life, too, language purists can take pretty drastic measures to further their arguments:

In 491BC the Persians demanded “earth and water” – signs of submission - from the Aegean islands and mainland cities. Many submitted. Athens and Sparta not only stood firm but murdered the Persian ambassadors. . The Athenians put them on trial and killed both the ambassadors and their translator for offenses against the Greek language; the Spartans simply threw them down a well. (Ryan, 2012:15).

I don't know whether Giovanni Maria, Italian despot (d. 1412) was a purist – more of a critical discourse analyst, really:

In May, 1409, when war was going on and the starving populace cried to him in the streets, Pace! Pace! he let loose his mercenaries upon them, and 200 lives were sacrificed: under penalty of the gallows it was forbidden to utter the words pace and Guerra, and the priests were ordered, instead of dona nobis pacem, to say tranquillitatem! (Burckhardt, 1909).

Of course, there's a grand tradition of writers taking language as a major topic or element in their fictional works: I've already mentioned Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and other such works include Orwell's 1984, Bradbury's *Rates of Exchange*, Eco's *Baudolino*, Burgess's *Clockwork Orange*, Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down* ... Less familiar examples must include Andrew Drummond's *A Hand-book of Volapük* (2006), which despite its title is a novel. Set in a fantasy late nineteenth-century world, it recounts the desperate battle between Dr. Bosman, an Esperanto militant, and Mr. Justice, a leading apologist for Volapük and manages to be at the same time extremely funny and intensely insightful for anyone interested in the linguistics and politics of artificial languages. Mr Justice kidnaps Dr Bosman, to teach him a lesson – a grammar lesson. That this takes place in a mental asylum proves to be totally apposite.

Another novelist who places language centre stage is Diego Marani. This is not really surprising, as he is a European Commission expert on multilingualism. In his sixth novel, *The Last of the Vostyachs*, (2012,) Ivan, the last surviving speaker of the Vostyach language, wandering disconsolately in a Siberian forest wearing animal skins, is discovered by Olga, a Russian linguist, who triumphantly presents him to an academic conference in Helsinki. What follows manages to be both comic, as Marani anatomises the rivalries and hypocrisies of academia in a manner worthy of David Lodge, and extremely moving as he reflects on language, nationalism, violence and identity. As a penetrating, erudite examination of the vexed questions of language death, of the ethics and practicalities of artificially extending the lives of threatened languages and of the ownership of language, Marani's book is all the more valuable and humane because he avoids the distorting sentimentality so often on display in discussion of these questions.

But even more relevant to our present polyglossic concerns is Marani's invention of Europanto, an artificial language. The allusion to a much better-known artificial tongue is clear and is illustrative of Europanto's main purpose: fun, or as he puts it “Europanto want

nicht informe aber amuse." The text below, written for Belgian readers, is an example of a Dutch-German-French variant of Europanto. Although it belongs to the Germanic branch, it also contains a number of Romance elements.

(Inspector Cabillot is the Brussels-based hero of a number of Marani's stories).

Aquello augusto postmeridio, Cabillot was in seine officio un crossverba in europanto solvente. Out del window, under eine unhabitual sun splendente, la city suffoqued van calor. Zweideca vertical: "Esse greco, esse blanco und se mange", quatro litteras. Cabillot was nicht zo bravo in crossverbas. Seine boss le obliged crossverbas te make ut el cervello in exercizio te keep, aber aquello postmeridio inspector Cabillot was mucho somnolento. Wat esse greco, esse blanco und se mange? tinqued. May esse el glace-cream? No, dat esse italiano aber greco nicht. Cabillot slowemente closed los ojos und sich endormed op seine buro. Der telefono ringante presto lo reawakened.

"Hallo-cocco! Cabillot parlante!"

"Aqui Capitan What! Come subito in meine officio!"

"Yesvohl, mein capitan!" responded Cabillot out van der door sich envolante.

Capitan What was muchissimo nervoso der map des Europas op el muro regardante und seine computero excitatissimo allumante.

"Cabillot! Nos habe esto messagio on el computero gefinden! Regarde alstubitte!"

I hate to think of what Marani's e-mail in-tray must contain from the anti-polyglot lobby.

E.S. Purnell is also resident in Brussels where she works as a conference interpreter and she has just published a novel, *The Mistress*, whose protagonist is Muriel, a translator. Muriel's thoughts about translation and about language in general, her descriptions of her professional life, including her dealings with bone-headed and tight-fisted superiors, will strike a chord with many a reader, as will her descriptions of polyglottal socialising. Like many translators and interpreters, she also has an extremely wide range of intellectual interests and knowledge of arcane areas of scientific research and, together with her quirky personality and sharp tongue provides a succession of scenes which are often extremely funny, sometimes moving in an intelligent Bridget Jones sort of way. The novel's plot is too complex to allow of brief summary: it's a complex brew of sex and romance, languages and linguistics, obsession and the search for eternal youth, not to forget plane-spotting.

It is said of Pablo Casals that, when asked why, at the age of ninety-three he persisted in practicing his cello, he replied "I think I'm beginning to notice some improvement". I think Beckett was making the same point with his "Fail better". So too, perhaps, Immanuel Kant in minor key: "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made", famously appropriated by Isaiah Berlin and glossed tragically but soberly as "... the search for perfection does seem to me a recipe for bloodshed, no better even if it is demanded by the sincerest of idealists, the purest of heart". All Utopias

fit this bill and the closer they come to realisation, the bloodier they get (- think Jesus, Mohammed, Robespierre, Marx ...). Everyone's Utopia is someone else's Hell – and I'm definitely including Plato's and More's. Polyglossia may be just another case of crooked wood, but it will always be preferable to enforced uniformity or simply a bored lack of interest in others. Rudyard Kipling may be wildly unfashionable, but I think he hit the nail on the head:

All good people agree,
 And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We
 And everyone else is They:
But if you cross over the sea,
 Instead of over the way,
You may end by (think of it!) looking on We
 As only a sort of They!

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