Foreign languages as a source of creative writing

1. Writing in a foreign language: the special case of English

Many authors have felt the impulse, or need, to write in a language other than their mother tongue. Often that happens when they leave home to live in new cultural surroundings where a different language is spoken. Writers in exile are a dramatic example here, as they are forced to leave their home countries, rather than relocating by choice. They used to make a living by writing in their own language, but in their new situation, it doesn’t serve them as a means of communication. So they adapt and write in a language they may have only just acquired.

My case is nothing as extreme. It was merely attraction to the English language that made me want to write in it. I studied English translation and over the years I had more or less extensive stays in various English language environments. Then I had the good fortune to find an English-language writers’ group in Vienna: Labyrinth, the Association of Vienna’s English Language Poets, whose founding members, Peter Waugh and Karin Kaminker, I had met at the Vienna Poetry School. In spite of the encouraging atmosphere in the group, the first poem I wrote there was a sound poem. I was afraid I would make a stupid mistake in English, so I wanted to be on the safe side: who could correct a sound poem?

English is the world’s language. ‘More than 300 million people in the world speak English, and the rest, it sometimes seems, try to.’¹ In 2003, the ratio of non-native speakers of English compared to native speakers was estimated at 3:1.² Thus, non-natives are a major target group (and a major group of authors) of texts in English.

Like it or not, people have to use English in global communication. This is especially true of the academic world. If you want to be part of international discourse in your field, you have to publish your findings in English. This is a great potential of work for translators, but more and more people are expected to have a working knowledge of, or even a certain fluency in English themselves, rather than rely on transcultural communication experts such as interpreters or translators.

But English also dominates our everyday lives via media, advertising and popular culture. Certainly there are differences as to the extent to which that is true in various cultural environments. The general phenomenon may evoke enthusiasm for everything English, or rather, US-American, especially in regimes where outside influences were suppressed during a political era, but may also cause a certain reluctance or irritation. My first poetic example is an outburst addressed to a teacher of English, who personifies the cultural dominance of the language s/he teaches. I have composed it in a deliberately incorrect English idiolect that should still be understood by English speakers, whether native or not.

YOU
GET MY NERVE ON ARE!
ALWAYS ME CORRECT
WHEN USE I WRONG TENSE WORD OR ORDER

YOU
ALWAYS WISER
ALWAYS TEACHER
NOT ONE TIME CARE SAY WHAT
ONLY CARE SAY HOW

YOU
SNOBBERY
ALWAYS ON HORSE SO HIGH
NOT EVEN SEE WILL ME HOW STUMBLE
OVER HARD ENGLISH!
SO PERFECT ALWAYS SPEAK OUT OF YOU
BUT NO FEEL IN YOU
YOU THERE JUDGE
NO HELP.

YOU
COMING IN MY LANGUAGE?
I BE PLEASE MUCH LET YOU DROWN IN
NO SINGLE FINGER I MOVING SAVES YOU
YOU DIE
SURE
CORRECT.³

2. A different way of listening

   An die deutsche Sprache (by Hillary Keel)⁴

so klar, so bestimmt
mit Anfang und Ende.


bestimmt. so konkret, eine Sprache
mit Anfang und Ende
wie ich Anfang und Ende habe.
Du, ch ch ch ch Sprache
Du, st st st st
Du, sp sp sp
Du, rr r r r
Du, Sp-rr-a-ch-e

Du, Mundart, Art des Mundes
Art des Sprechens
Du bist tüchtig
fleißig
Du üüü, Du ööö, Du äää
Du Wendung voller Fälle (...)

Born and raised in the U.S., Hillary Keel moved to Austria and lived there for 27 years. In this first part of her ode to the German language, she not only lists some characteristics of the German language, but also reproduces the impression of how German sounds to her as a non-native speaker or rather, listener. She plays with the literal meaning of words like *Mundart* (‘type of the mouth’, a synonym for vernacular) and uses grammatical expressions (*Wendung, Fälle*) as metaphors. With German as a foreign language, she has a fresh perspective on its qualities and notices peculiar aspects that a native speaker might miss.

Here is my translation of this passage (with input by the author, for which I am very grateful):

*An die deutsche Sprache – Ode to the German language* (by Hillary Keel)

so clear, so determined
from beginning to end.
determined, so concrete, a language
with a beginning and an ending
just as I have a beginning and an end.
Du, ch ch ch ch Sprache
Du, st st st st
Du, sp sp sp
Du, rr r r
Du, Sp-rr-a-ch-e

You’re a mouthful, passed on by word of mouth
by way of speaking
you are tüchtig – diligent
fleißig – industrious
Du üüü, Du ööö, Du äää
with phrases full of cases (...)

3. English in German words: Ernst Jandl’s surface translation

Austrian experimental poet Ernst Jandl, who also worked as a high school teacher of English in Vienna, used a poem by William Wordsworth as source text for what he entitled oberflächenübersetzung (surface translation).

my heart leaps up when i behold
a rainbow in the sky
so was it when my life began
so is it now i am a man
so be it when i shall grow old
or let me die!
the child is father of the man
and i could wish my days to be
bound each to each by natural piety
(william wordsworth)\(^5\)

Ernst Jandl’s version is produced by someone who listens to himself read this poem. A Viennese accent is noticeable in his choice of German words. It is a homophonic translation that may remind one of Oskar Pastior\(^6\):

mai hart lieb zapfen eibe hold
er renn bohr in sees kai
so was sieht wenn mai läuft begehen
so es sieht nahe emma mählen
so biet wenn ärschel grollt
ohr leck mit e!
seht steil dies fader rosse mählen
in teig kurt wisch mai desto bier

\(^5\) Small print as used by Ernst Jandl
\(^6\) I would like to thank Daniel Soukup for this observation.
Different from Hillary Keel’s poem, here the sounds are not isolated, but reproduced in a new context, that of the German language, creating new meaning. As Michael Hammerschmied has pointed out in his essay Übersetzung als Verhaltensweise (Translation as a mode of behaviour), the aim of this translation is not to be ‘true to the original text’ in the sense of trying to recreate its meaning in a different language. Rather, Jandl is true to the surface of Wordsworth’s text, thus opening up a new space for associations, which depart totally from the images and themes used in the source text. To give an impression of Jandl’s creative strategy, I have embarked on a semantic surface translation of his German text into English:

May hard love pivot yew tree fair
he run drill in lake’s pier
so what sees when May runs to mark
so it sees Emma mow nearby
so bid if asshole growls
ear lick with egg!
See steep these boring horses mow
in dough Kurt scrap May all the beer
tree German German bayonet shear Alp egg deer.

While Wordsworth’s text is introspective, Jandl takes the readers into the outside world, and aspects of a landscape become visible: a tree, a lake, a pier, the Alps, animals (horses, deer). The author’s self has left the text, there are other people in the text-world that Jandl creates: Emma, who is working the land (mowing) and Kurt; these characters have bodies (ear, asshole), and there is also some nourishment provided, not only food for thought: egg, dough, beer. The bayonet tells us that the author of the translation certainly knows about war. The poem was written in the 1950s in post-war Austria.

4. ‘Use all you have’ – the challenge of mixing languages

In the title of this section I have quoted one of the principles I learned from Anne Tardos, multilingual poet, composer, and visual artist, when she taught at the Vienna Poetry School in the 1990s. Working with several languages as a professional translator, it seemed natural that I should use them in my writing. But good translators have to keep their languages in separate compartments of their minds. Interferences are strictly prohibited. Now, I felt encouraged to use several languages in one text. Fittingly, my first attempt contained the words J’ai peur (I’m scared).

A more confident approach followed:

Ohne Worte

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8 http://www.engeler.de/hammerschmidluca.pdf
9 http://www.annetardos.com/
In retrospect, I see the last word, “Speak up”, as not only addressed to the Other in the text, but also to myself as an author who knows several languages and how to make them work in combination. The next step was to spread the word about this exciting practice.

5. Multilingual writing at the Centre of Translation Studies (University of Vienna)

I have taught Creative Writing at the Centre of Translation Studies of the University of Vienna since 2007, when it was established as a compulsory subject there. The University of Vienna is a public university. In 2010, the Centre of Translation Studies had 3591 students and offered courses in 14 languages. The M.A. programme in Translation had 298 students. A maximum of 30 students per group participate in Creative Writing classes. There are approximately 12 hours in class per semester. Classes are supported by e-learning; we use the platform Fronter, which was developed in Norway. Students post their texts in a forum for discussion and comments.

Multilingual writing is one of the assignments in these classes. First, students present audio pieces (songs or poems) in languages or dialects other than standard German (from their own cultural backgrounds) as well as the context and some background information. Listeners are encouraged to take notes on what they hear and gather ideas to create their own piece (poem, short prose, mini-drama) combining the presented material and languages (words, motifs, sounds, ...). I should mention here that the note-taking part during the presentation seldom works, unless I adapt the assignment to make it more like Ernst Jandl’s surface translation.

10 [http://com fronter.info/](http://com fronter.info/)
Participants seem to be too involved in listening and following the presenter to take notes at the same time. Also, they know that all the presented material will be available on the e-learning platform so they can work on their own texts at home.

Here is one of the results of such an assignment:

DAS GESENK DER LITERATUR (The Gift of Literature, by Michaela König)

Worte, palabras,
qui forment des phrases,
Sätze, zinnen,
que relatan mis sentimentos,
ganze Seiten, a lot of pages,
die mijn binnest weerspiegelen,
Texte, des textes
that can be seen as my own private meditation,
Gedichte, poemas,
qui peuvent être tristes,

Woorden, Worte
que a veces son llenas de alegría,
Sentences, frases,
deren Klang mir Inhalte vermittelt,
bién que je n’entende pas la langue,
Talen, languages,
qui nous séparent, mais
are able to unify just as well,
Schrijven, écrire,
und das Geschriebene zu lesen
o escucharlo con los ojos cerrados,
est le cadeau de la littérature.
An obvious problem of multilingual text is who can receive them. How do we understand what we can’t understand? One way is to listen to such texts as we listen to music, and to read them as we read music, ornaments, or mathematical formulae. Other types of texts have their secrets and codes, too. This element of surprise and suspense is part of the gift of literature.