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**Sounds good, but what does it mean?**

### **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.'<sup>1</sup> In 2003, the ratio of non-native speakers of English compared to native speakers was estimated at 3:1.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryson, Bill. <sup>3</sup>2009. *Mother Tongue. The Story of the English language*. London etc.: Penguin, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Crystal, David. <sup>2</sup>2003. *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 69.

ENGLISH ☞✚✚✚✚✚✚

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.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. A different way of listening

*An die deutsche Sprache* (by Hillary Keel)<sup>4</sup>

so klar, so bestimmt

mit Anfang und Ende.

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<sup>3</sup> Published in Subdream, The Vienna Journal of English-Language Poetry Vol. 1, No. 2, Winter 1998/99, <http://www.labyrinthpoetry.com/subdream/issues.html> (this and all following links last visited 15 March 2011)

<sup>4</sup> Full text of this and other poems by Hillary Keel on <http://thebeehive.com/artipoetry6.html>; you can hear Hillary Keel performing *An die deutsche Sprache* at the First Friday Contemporary Writers Series, Narrowsburg, New York via <http://lejmoran.podbean.com/2010/10/20/october-1-2010-first-fridays-open-mic/>

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 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)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>:

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

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<sup>5</sup> Small print as used by Ernst Jandl

<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Daniel Soukup for this observation.

baum deutsche deutsch bajonett schur alp eiertier  
(ernst jandl)<sup>7</sup>

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)<sup>8</sup>, 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<sup>9</sup>, 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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<sup>7</sup> Jandl, Ernst. 1997. *sprechblasen. poetische werke* 3. Ed. by Klaus Siblewski. München: Luchterhand, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.engeler.de/hammerschmidluca.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.annetardos.com/>

Ich want tanto parler contigo,  
aber I sé pas cual Sprache you parle  
I möchte tant hablar mit toi  
but je weiß not quel language du hablas  
Je quiero so much sprechen avec you  
mais i don't sais what idioma you sprichst

Quiero, mais know nicht  
Veux, aber weiß not  
Möchte, but no sais ...

Sprich!

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<sup>10</sup>. 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.

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<sup>10</sup> <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 Geschenk der Literatur (The Gift of Literature, by Michaela König)

Worte, palabras,  
qui forment des phrases,  
Sätze, zinnen,  
que relatan mis sentimientos,  
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,  
bien 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.