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Introduction

Emily Eells

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Introduction

Introduction

Emily Eells

Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of "our-own-ness", varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate.¹ Bakhtin

- ¹ "Parasitic? *Moi?*?" reads the caption to the picture attached to a recent article in *The Economist*.² Reports of the latest ornithological research are thus illustrated with a note of humour in the bird's complacent surprise that it could possibly be accused of behaving like a parasite. The shift from the English adjective "parasitic" to the French pronoun "*moi*" maps the question addressed by this collection of essays. What difference in meaning – if any – does it make to have the bird say "*moi*" rather than "me"? Does it denote an association of national characteristics such as French pride and self-importance, or is it merely a modulation in tonality and accent? The responses presented here explore the implications of using foreign words which vary from the aesthetic to the sociological, from the political to the comic.
- ² The cuckoo is an appropriate image to introduce these studies which focus on how using foreign words involves more than simply parroting the words of others. The cuckoo is a migratory bird which does not hatch its own offspring but leaves its eggs in the nests of others. According to the article in *The Economist*, there is evidence that the host nest benefits from the cuckoo's parasitic habits. This can be read as an analogy of the studies in this volume which aim to show how migrant words enrich the host language by engaging in the dynamics of interlinguistic discourse.

- 3 Using a French term instead of an English one is never a case of simple substitution, despite what the Queen of Hearts in *Through the Looking-Glass* implies to Alice when she advises her to: “Speak in French when you can’t think of the English for a thing”.³ The foreign word brings something more to the text, adding value even if only in terms of playfulness and pleasure. As Beckett says of the central character in *More Pricks than Kicks* “he never used the English word when the foreign pleased him better”.⁴ Theodor Adorno’s two essays “On the Use of Foreign Words” and “Words from Abroad”⁵ provide a theoretical framework for the following collection of articles. His statement: “The foreign word is better whenever its literal translation is not literal, for whatever reason”⁶ defines its objective: to explore the myriad reasons – political, sociological, artistic or subjective – why, in what sense and in what ways, the foreign word is “better” than its literal translation.
- 4 This volume of articles opens with an extended inquiry into the significance of the word “decency” which Thierry Labica foregrounds as a foreign word twice removed. It derives from the Latin “decree”, meaning to be fitting, and the French “*décent*”; Mallarmé cites it in his essay on “Les Mots anglais” as an example of a French word transformed into an English word by the simple addition of a suffix : “*décence* donne DECENCY.”⁷ Paradoxically, this word of foreign origin is used to refer to a defining characteristic of Englishness. Thierry Labica reads Lord Chesterfield’s letters to his son as a treatise on “decency”: being English means belonging to a national community by embracing its qualities of decency which serve as a kind of passport to citizenship of a universal cosmopolitan community. External decency is a performance which creates another self, estranged and set apart from the inner self which has its own qualities of decency, namely such virtues as honesty, open-heartedness and authenticity. Labica uses neologism to represent that divide between inner and outer decency, referring to it with the verbal form “*s’étranger*” and the adjective “*étrangé*”.
- 5 Orwell’s notion of “common decency” is indebted to Lord Chesterfield whom the author of *Why Orwell Matters* seems to echo when he comments that the term of decency – “habitually applied to Orwell both as man and as writer” – is “yet another of the supposedly ‘English virtues’”.⁸ Orwell’s essay “Politics and the English language” – the subject of Pierre Guerlain’s article – is a master class in the art of decent discourse, purged of political propaganda. It opens with Orwell’s statement that English is “in a bad way” and develops into a critique of a slovenly use of the language which he believed resulted from oppressive ideology. He condemns pretentious use of foreign words in his list of the “swindles and perversions” characterizing a sloppy use of English. He argues that “a mass of Latin words blurs the outline and covers up the details” and does not mince his words when he offers his advice on how to improve written English: “Never use a foreign phrase [...] if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.”⁹
- 6 The literary studies in this collection reflect on how some writers-in-the-making use foreign words to forge their signature style. Nathalie Saudo-Welby’s analysis of Sarah Grand’s *The Beth Book* traces the protagonist’s development from a young girl at a loss for words to a mature orator, which involves learning the language of others. Beth experiences her mother tongue as a foreign, man-made language estranged from her own sensitivities, and turns to foreign languages to find her voice. Her status as a woman who uses the foreign to shape a language of her own struck one of the first reviewers of the novel who followed suit by borrowing French terms to define her as a “*femme*”, a “*fille, incomprise*” [sic] and an “*enfant terrible*”.¹⁰ The use of foreign words grants Beth freedom of

speech as a woman while at the same time anticipating the language revolution of the early twentieth century which was characterized by plurilingualism. Jean Rhys (herself a translator from French) locates the instability of her characters' states of mind in the interstices of language. Juliana Lopoukhine's analysis of how she makes the foreign language into the language of the affect in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* exemplifies Adorno's point: "Foreign words become the bearers of subjective contents: of the nuances."¹¹ French words irrupt in the text and serve to trace the pangs of emotion experienced by the protagonist Julia in the wake of a romantic relationship. The shifts in typography convey the untranslatable and the inarticulable, beginning with the card advertising the Parisian hotel where Julia takes refuge. The information given in French is framed by stark black lines, like mourning stationery. The italicized foreign words destabilize the text by setting the letters at a slant, just as Julia has been thrown off-kilter by estrangement from her lover.

- 7 In his reflections entitled *Extraterritorial*, George Steiner examines "the emergence of linguistic pluralism or 'unhousedness'"¹² which he identifies as the defining feature of modernism, studying in particular two of the authors under scrutiny in this volume: Vladimir Nabokov and Samuel Beckett. The latter's first novel *Fair to Middling Women* was written in English but punctuated with numerous foreign words, in a kind of hybrid language which Chiara Monti so aptly termed his "*monolinguisme polyglotte*".¹³ Pascale Sardin's reading of this novel highlights how the foreign word partakes in Beckett's aesthetic ambition to create what he calls the "*non-mot*". The foreign words in his novel make the first steps towards the "non word" as they seem to function as tokens devoid of any semantic significance.
- 8 The aesthetic notion of the "*non-mot*" finds a political and sociological counterpart in Guillaume Leblanc's essay on how the foreigner is colonized by the language of the society he inhabits to such an extent that his own language is affected. In his monograph *Dedans, dehors* he defines his concept of the « *no-langue* », ¹⁴by which he means a language belonging to no-one – neither the foreigner, nor his host. Before expounding on the resonance of Le Blanc's philosophy, Jean-Jacques Lecercle returns to Adorno's incisive statement: "German words of foreign derivation are the Jews of language".¹⁵ He argues that one of Adorno's unacknowledged reasons for returning to his native Germany after self-imposed exile during the Second World War was the fact that one's mother tongue expresses the affect. Lecercle's study of the displaced writer takes Nabokov's *Pnin* as a literary example of a work authored by a cosmopolitan polyglot, portraying a Russian academic in exile in America and comically at odds with the English language.
- 9 *Pnin*, as well as Nabokov's first novel in English – *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* – are the subject of Julie Loison-Charles' article in which she shows how the distance created by the use of foreign words allows for comic effect. *Pnin* is a linguistic clown – a "funny foreigner" to use Michael Cronin's term – who "bears the taint of ridicule and grapples with the intricacies of syntax and the treacheries of *faux-amis*."¹⁶ Julie Loison-Charles illustrates how the ludic verve of Nabokov's prose is sparked off by the friction of different languages. The following passage from *Pnin* gently mocks the eponymous anti-hero's nostalgia for his family and homeland in the way it weaves together Russian words and allusions to Shakespeare:

... plīla i pela, pela i plīla ...

... she floated and she sang, she sang and she floated ...

Of course! Ophelia's death! Hamlet! In good old Andrey Kroneberg's Russian translation, 1844 – the joy of Pnin's youth, and of his father's and grandfather's

young days! And here [...] there is, we recollect, also a willow and also wreaths. But where to check properly? Alas, 'Gamlet', Vil'yama Shekspira [...] was not represented in Waindell College Library, and whenever you were reduced to look up something in the English version, you never found this or that beautiful, noble, sonorous line that you remembered all your life from Kroneberg's text in Vengerov's splendid edition. Sad!¹⁷

- 10 The momentary discomfort experienced by English-speaking readers when faced with the transliterated Russian words quickly resolves into a smile when they decipher the Russian words for Shakespeare and *Hamlet*. The chiasmus in Russian at the beginning of the passage sets the poetic tone, which uses foreignized words to evoke the cherished memory of the character's first reading of *Hamlet*. The poetic is debunked by Pnin's literary appreciation as he ranks Shakespeare in translation above the original version.
- 11 Exile, immigration and being forced to learn what has been called a "stepmother tongue" take on political implications in the post-colonial world. New literatures in English have enhanced the language by introducing indigenous terms and expressions. Bernard Cros reads the *Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* as a record of the development of a distinctive, territorialized brand of English. He reminds us that South Africa counts eleven official languages and that English is spoken by less than ten percent of the population. It nevertheless has tremendous political importance as it was the language of freedom used to ring the changes and to toll the end of the regime of apartheid imposed by speakers of Afrikaans. South African English is undergoing constant mutation and its vocabulary has been augmented with new words related to current events and developments in society, such as the example Cros gives of the expression "black diamond" used to refer to a black person from the emerging middle classes.
- 12 Cécile Birks makes Coetzee's autobiographical novel *Summertime* the object of her study. This narrative begins with extracts from the writer's notebooks, which immediately plunge the reader into a linguistic maelstrom. Commenting on an incident of racial violence reported in the press, the author enigmatically notes "Agenbite of inwit". The reader probably has no clue what that phrase means, and might even wonder what language is being used. Unless he or she remembers – or does the necessary research to discover – that Joyce uses the term in *Ulysses* to signify "remorse of conscience". Coetzee uses that strange expression to throw his readers off-balance and to make them experience the instability of living in South African culture.
- 13 Alice Braun concentrates on another autobiographical novel: *the bone people* by New Zealand born Keri Hulme. She stresses that the author feels a particular affinity with the Maoris and uses their words and expressions in her text, to which she appends a glossary. The novel focuses on a trio of isolated characters – Kerewen, a recluse and a painter; Joe, a lonely widower who has been forced to espouse European culture; and, thirdly, his adopted son Simon who has lost the ability to speak in a shipwreck. The interweaving of different languages reflects the complexity of the relationship between the characters and their cultural environment. That complexity is conveyed by the typography, starting with the author's choice to portray *the bone people* as ordinary people without capitalizing their identity in the title. In this novel, the foreign becomes a non-word in a no-language as the Maoris express themselves with body language, for example when they greet each other with a "*hongiri*" in which they draw close, face to face, pressing their noses together and breathing the same air. The novel concludes with a line in the Maori's language, set

in block capitals. The glossary spells out its meaning: “It is the end – or the beginning”, thus serving as a powerful example of “How the Empire Writes Back”.¹⁸

- 14 This volume issues a salutary reminder. Although English has become a global language as a consequence of linguistic and cultural imperialism, it is constantly being enriched by the words of others. They have a visual presence in the text, forming a pattern on the page in the way they are set off by quotation marks, italicized or cast in a different font. They are adopted and adapted into the language through typography, which marks their degree of assimilation. Foreign words make the text into a musical score denoting different accents, tones of voice and modes of pronunciation. They are set in-between words of another language, where they are caught in the interstices of language. This process marks what Deleuze would call the “*devenir langue*”. Foreign words are encircled by the words of the host text, imprisoned in the chain of words in the other language. To echo the French expression Jean Rhys translated at the end of the novel studied in this collection of articles, they are “*entre chien et loup*”: they no longer have the wildness of the wolf, but do not yet have the tameness of the dog.

NOTES

1. M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (trans. Vern McGee, eds Carlyl Emerson and Michael Holquist), Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1986, 89.
2. *The Economist*, 22 March 2014. This reference is indebted to James McCabe’s insightful and informative work on the use of French in *The Economist*. See <https://www.academia.edu/11070707/French_Words_as_Foreign_Words_in_The_Economist>
3. Lewis Carroll *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, London: Macmillan, 1872, 45.
4. Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, New York: Grove Press, 1970, 56.
5. See Theodor Adorno, “Words from Abroad” and “On the Use of Foreign Words”, in *Notes to Literature*, vols 1 and 2 (ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN), New York: Columbia UP, 1991.
6. Adorno, “Words from Abroad”, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, 195. My emphasis.
7. Stéphane Mallarmé, “Les mots anglais” in *Œuvres complètes* (eds Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry), Paris : Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1945, 1017.
8. Christopher Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters*. New York: Basic Books, 2002, 134.
9. See George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language” [1946] in *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1950. Also available at <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm>
10. See ‘Sarah Grand’s New Novel’, *The Glasgow Herald*, 5 November 1897, 4.
11. Theodor Adorno, “On the Use of Foreign Words” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN), New York: Columbia UP, 1991, 287.

12. George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution*, Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1972, 10.
 13. Chiara Montini, « La bataille du soliloque », *Genèse de la poétique bilingue de Samuel Beckett (1929-1946)*, Amsterdam : Rodopi, 2007, 33. Cited by Pascale Sardin.
 14. Guillaume Leblanc, *Dedans, dehors : la condition d'étranger*, Paris : Seuil, 2010, 129.
 15. See Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* [1951] (trans. E.F.H. Jephcott), London: Verso, 2005, 110.
 16. Michael Cronin, *Across the Lines: Travel, Language, Translation*, Cork: Cork UP, 2000, 46.
 17. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* [1957], London: Penguin, 1997, 65-66.
 18. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989.
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AUTHOR

EMILY EELLS

Emily Eells is Professor of British literature and head of the English Department at the University of Paris Ouest at Nanterre. She is author of *Proust's Cup of Tea: Homoeroticism and Victorian Culture* (Ashgate, 2002), and *Two Tombeaux to Oscar Wilde: Jean Cocteau's Le Portrait surnaturel de Dorian Gray and Raymond Laurent's essay on Wildean aesthetics* (Rivendale Press, 2010). She has published of several articles on the use of foreign words by British authors (Wilde and Charlotte Brontë in particular), and is currently working on a book project entitled *Wilde's French*. This issue of the *Revue Lisa* presents the recent work of her research group *Confluences: Les mots étrangers* (CREA : Centre de recherches anglophones).