

CHOOSING A LANGUAGE TO CHOOSE WHO TO BE. EXPERIENCES OF LANGUAGE CHOICES FROM THE LITERARY WORLD

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Sommario

Oggi giorno l'esistenza di una relazione forte e indissolubile tra linguaggio e identità è universalmente riconosciuta e scientificamente radicata. Tale relazione ha implicazioni che vanno oltre la semplice sfera della comunicazione esplicita e arrivano nei più profondi e spesso sconosciuti tratti della personalità umana. Questo articolo analizza alcuni aspetti di questa interdipendenza affascinante e intrigante, con un focus sugli effetti che ha avuto nel mondo letterario.

Keywords: Migrant literature, language and identity

“Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiß nichts von seiner eigenen.”
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
Maximen und Reflexionen, no. 1015,
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1. Introduction

Among the research strands of contemporary Italian literature an increasing role has been acquired, especially since the early nineties of the last century, by the so-called “migrant literature”. We could define it as a literary expression in a language other than one’s own, and specifically in Italian, by authors of foreign and alloclot origins. From

the definition that we propose here, by focusing on the linguistic dimension and perspective rather than on the strictly literary one, it reveals that it is a genre directly and closely related to social changes, and in particular to the “centripetal” role (Santipolo, 2006) with respect to the migratory flows that Italy has increasingly begun to play, since the decade preceding the birth of this new genre.

It goes without saying that social changes, in turn, reflect and are the consequence of changes of an economic and political nature, not only local, but global, especially in a reality such as the contemporary one in which national microsystems are both dependent on and responsible for the planetary macrosystem. Using an overused term, we could speak of a “glocal” perspective which therefore also produces repercussions on the daily life of each of us, albeit in different ways and to different degrees depending on the place we occupy in the peer groups and social networks to which we belong. In countries with a longer and more consolidated immigrant history and tradition (such as Germany or Belgium), or with an important and massive colonial past (primarily Great Britain and France), the Migrant Literature or *Littérature de l'immigration* has a much more remote history than Italy.

In reality, although the phenomenon is often seen as unitary, and the terms that define it in the various languages are interpreted as mere translations of each other, under this real hypernym there lies different types of literature: from that, more recent, of immigrants in a foreign country who learn its language and use it to produce literature; to that of post-colonial contexts in which the language of the coloniser has totally or partially supplanted local languages, at least as languages of culture (and in so doing have become acrolects), or where one chooses to use it anyway to have a greater visibility at world level, since languages so superimposed have often had a great importance as international languages. This second typology includes the most striking known and studied cases of literature in English (from India to Sri Lanka, passing through the Caribbean) and French (from Morocco to Tunisia, and a large “slice” of Central Africa)¹. Despite these macro-differences, however, there seems to be a common thread that runs through the *Migrationsliteratur* (however one understands it) and somehow becomes its predominant brand, especially in the early stages

¹ Given the now enormous number of authors included in this category it would be impossible here to even try to provide a short list. See Adou, 2013; Innes, 2007; Shenaglia, 2009.

of its development: it is, without doubt, the question of language and the sense of identity that it conveys. In this sense not even the migrant literature in Italian (with writers such as the Togolese doctor Kossi Komla-Ebri²; the Italian-Ethiopian, Gabriella Ghermandi³, and the Brazilian, Julio Monteiro Martins⁴, all present in the *Basili & Limm*, that is to say, the Database of Immigrant Writers in Italian Language and the Italian Literature of World Migration website founded by Armando Gnisci in 1997: <http://basili-limm.el-ghibli.it/>) is an exception. Topics such as “loss of the mother tongue”, “bewilderment”, “linguistic limbo” “appropriation of the new language” are always present in writers who choose to write in the language of “the other”, regardless of the many and varied reasons that may lead them to do so, whether personal, emotional, political, instrumental or of any other nature.

In this, then, the literature on migration seems to be able to give voice to the experiences of millions of individuals, who (although participating in often, but not always, painful, similar experiences) do not have the opportunity or the means to narrate them. It should not be forgotten, however, that through language passes the vision of the world, the culture, but even more deeply, the vision of oneself and one's place in the new society that follows from it. Not to be overlooked is also the impact that the new alloglot authors can produce on the language they use, sometimes going so far as to modify some aspects of it (think mainly of the lexicon, but also of the textual and discursive structure). If, as far as Italian is concerned, migrant literature is a recent phenomenon, there are no lack of examples in the history of world literature of authors who have chosen, sometimes also for reasons not necessarily related to migration, to use a language not their own from birth, and in some cases, even acquired during full maturity. One could

² Born in Tsévié (Togo) in 1954 he moved to Italy in the mid-seventies, after living in France. His works in Italian include *La lingua strappata. Testimonianze e letteratura migranti* (1999) and *Imbarazzismi. Quotidiani imbarazzi in bianco e nero* (2002 and republished, in two volumes with expansions in 2013).

³ Born in Addis Ababa in 1965 and moved to Italy in 1979 where she still lives today.

⁴ Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1965 and died in Pisa in 2014, he is the author, among other things, of a novel with an emblematic title *mother-tongue* (2005), which is actually a novel about how to write a novel with annexed reflections on language and not on a particular language. (It should be noted that the lowercase “m” of the title is a decision made by the author.)

speak, therefore, of a sort of “linguistic migration”, a heteroglossia as a choice, obligatory or intentional, literary or, more generally, even of personal life, and therefore a condition which is far from rare and which deserves, in our opinion, a sociolinguistic reflection. In the awareness of the impossibility of exhausting a theme of such scope and relevance in the space of a few pages, in this contribution we will therefore propose an overview of some of these “illustrious” cases (among whom are also some Nobel Prize winners for literature), dwelling in particular on the concept of heteroglossia as a choice. Language, therefore, as a place to find another self in some cases, in others even the true self.

2. The Language/Literature Relation

The relationship between language and literature is perhaps among those most studied, as much by literary criticism as by at least a certain current of linguistics. It would therefore be not only impractical, but also pretentious to try to briefly illustrate it here. For our purposes, it may be enough to highlight how language influences the structure of literary texts and the very *Weltanschauung* they convey. This question is well known to translators who often find themselves in the strenuous and stimulating condition of representing in another language the sociocultural complexity (with its values and points of reference⁵) of the original text. In this sense, one example among many is the case of Camilleri and his Inspector Montalbano, whose world, both linguistic and cultural, is very impassable, if not impossible, to re-create in any other language⁶.

Having said that, we can now focus our attention on the aspects most relevant to the topic here under discussion, and in order to do this we can identify three levels of analysis of the complex and articulated relationship between language and literature:

- a. on an individual level;
- b. socially;

⁵ On this fascinating and complex topic see Eco, 2003 and Capuano, 2013.

⁶ Particularly interesting is the case of the Arabic translation of *The Terracotta Dog*, purged of all vulgarisms and sexual references (Nicosia, 2018).

- c. as far as linguistic education and educational linguistics are concerned.

Individual Level

On an individual level, heteroglossia becomes a literary choice: similar to how an author chooses what to write, he must also choose how to express it, not only in terms of style, register, or genre, but also and, indeed, even before that, precisely in terms of what language to use. The choice of content cannot be separated from that of the form, or rather, of the linguistic medium through which it is conveyed, the two reflecting and reinforcing each other. If, in most cases, this option falls, for obvious reasons, on the language in which one feels more competent and at ease to express oneself because one has all the means and tools (or at least the best and most desirable ones) to do so, not infrequently in the history of literature the choice has gone in a different, even opposite direction. In such cases one can speak of *literary bilingualism* or even a *literary diglossia*, when opting for one language rather than another occurs in relation to the subject matter to be dealt with and who the potential recipients are (in line with Dell Hymes's well-known SPEAKING model). One perfect example of this is perhaps Dante Alighieri who, on the one hand writes the *Commedia* in Italian, but on the other, writes the treatise *De vulgari eloquentia* in Latin because it is addressed to an audience of experts (Bellomo, 2008). The same happens with many writers who alternate between Italian and dialect according to genre (typically prose or poetry, but sometimes also nonfiction), to the addressees and to the themes dealt with. It should be pointed out, however, that in these cases they are almost always bilingual Italian/dialect authors who also express a willingness to make a socio-political statement or declaration through their choice of language.

Quite different is, necessarily, the choice of those who are not "native" bilingual. Certainly, among the most famous authors who chose to write in a language other than their mother tongue, Samuel Beckett (Dublin 1906-Paris 1989) stands out. The Irish author, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969, and who had graduated in French, explains in a letter of 1937 to his friend Axel Kaun (Winkler, 2014):

It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothing-ness) behind it. Grammar and Style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask [...] Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved? [...] It is easier to write without style [...] [French] had the right weakening effect.

Beckett says he started writing in French to “get away” from his mother tongue: writing in English made him feel too comfortable, while French gave him the opportunity to reflect deeply on the language he was using and to write in a more effective and straight-to-the-point manner. For Beckett, at first, the choice to write in one language or another seems to arise from an instinctive fact, so much so that *Krapp's Last Tape* (1957) was written in English, while, as is well known, *En Attendant Godot* (1952) was originally written in French. But he explains how:

Since 1945 I have written only in French. Why this change? It was not deliberate. It was in order to change, to see, nothing more complicated than that, in appearance at least. In any case nothing to do with the reasons you suggest. I do not consider English a foreign language; it is my language. If there is one that is really foreign to me, it is Gaelic. (Craig et al., 2011:464)

Despite his declared “foreignness” towards Gaelic, Beckett nonetheless supports its value and cultural significance as a means to unify and keep the nation together, some sort of cultural glue for a country Ireland, that in those very years was in search of a liberation, not only political, from Great Britain (for a detailed analysis of the relationship between Beckett and Gaelic see Graham, 2015).

Linguistically interesting also is the experience of another Nobel Prize winner for literature (1987), Joseph (Iosif Aleksandrovič) Brodsky (Leningrad 1940-New York 1996). In an interview, given on

the occasion of the award ceremony, to the question: “You are an American citizen who is receiving the Prize for Russian-language poetry. Who are you, an American or a Russian?” he replied: “I’m Jewish; a Russian poet, an English essayist – and, of course, an American citizen”, highlighting, in few words, the full meaning of diglossia, not only literarily, but individually.

Equally complex is the story, not only linguistically, of Elias Canetti (Ruse, Bulgaria, 1905-Zurich, 1994), Nobel Prize winner in 1981, born in Bulgaria to a family of wandering Sephardic Jewish merchants (the family’s original surname was Cañete). After studying in Austria and Switzerland he moved to England and became a British citizen. Canetti spoke Judeo-Spanish (a Romance language derived from ancient Spanish and with influences from ancient Aragonese, Asturo-Leonese, ancient Catalan, Galician Portuguese, Mozarabic, Turkish-Ottoman and a Semitic lexical substratum based on Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic), Bulgarian, English and French: he was multilingual from a very early age. His relationship with all the languages he knew is analysed in his autobiography *Die gerettete Zunge* (*The Saved Language*, 1977). The language of choice for him became German, not only as “*Muttersprache*”, in the literal sense of the word (the language his mother spoke to his father when they did not want him to understand), but also as a Jew, as a form of opposition to Hitler: an attempt to disentangle German from Nazism. A choice, thus, as much personal and emotional as explicitly political.

Born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Berdichev (now Berdyčiv, Ukraine) from Polish parents and raised first in Russia and then in Poland, he grew up speaking Russian, Polish and French. At the age of 16 he moved to Marseille where he worked for a few years for the French navy and adopted a local accent. In 1886 he moved to England where, in less than two years, he learnt English and became Joseph Conrad (Berdychiv, Ukraine, 1857-Bishopsbourne, U.K., 1924). In the “Author’s Notes” to *A Personal Record* (1919), Conrad explains why he writes in English:

The truth of the matter is that my faculty to write in English is as natural as any other aptitude with which I might have been born. I have a strange and overpowering feeling that it had always been an inherent part of me. English was for

me neither a matter of choice nor adoption. The merest idea of choice had never entered my head. And as to adoption – well, yes, there was adoption; but it was I who was adopted by the genius of the language, which directly I came out of the stammering stage made me its own [...] All I can claim after all those years of devoted practice, with the accumulated anguish of its doubts, imperfections, and falterings in my heart, is the right to be believed when I say that if I had not written in English, I would not have written at all.

Analysing this choice Najder (1983:116) gives an interpretation based on psychological motivation:

Writing in a foreign language admits a greater temerity in tackling personally sensitive problems; for it leaves uncommitted the most spontaneous, deeper reaches of the psyche, and allows a greater distance in treating matters we would hardly dare approach in the language of our childhood. As a rule, it is easier both to swear and to analyse dispassionately in an acquired language.

This is all the more surprising when one thinks that throughout his whole life Conrad continued to speak English “strangely [...] not badly altogether, but that he had the habit of pronouncing the final e of these and those”, as his friend H.G. Wells recalls in his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934). In practice, while retaining a marked Polish accent in speech, Conrad not only succeeded in taking possession of the language but also in giving it an exotic, lexical and original touch, which led him to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1905. In some ways Conrad is probably one of the first literary examples of what has since been called *New English*, i.e. the set of those non-native or quasi-native varieties of English developed in the Outer and Expanding Circle of the Kachru Model (Kachru, 1986).

Certainly, very different in genesis is the case of Franz Kafka (Prague, 1883-Kierling, Austria, 1924), whose parents probably spoke a variety of German strongly influenced by Yiddish, but who encouraged him to rather speak *Hochdeutsch*, as it was considered an

essential tool for social mobility. Though a good connoisseur of Czech as well, Kafka never published works in this language. Moreover, similarly to what we said about Canetti, for Kafka the expression “mother tongue” referring to German must also be understood in a literal sense, his mother being German-speaking, while his father had Czech as his first language. As can be seen from the *Brief an den Vater* (*Letter to his Father*, 1919), which is actually an attempt at an autobiography, for him the father figure is tyrannical, dominating, materialistic, overwhelming: choosing to write in German, therefore, becomes a way to get away from it, to escape elsewhere. Kafka's bilingualism and the option for literary writing in only one of the two known languages, thus stems from an intimate and stringent motivation, not opposable.

Vladimir Nabokov (St. Petersburg, 1899-Montreux, Switzerland, 1977) also grew up multilingual, as in his family Russian, English and French were regularly spoken, and he even learnt to read and write English before Russian. Two chapters of his autobiographical memoirs *Speak, Memory* (1951) are dedicated respectively to “My English Education” (chapter 4) and “My Russian Education” (chapter 8). Nabokov described himself in these terms: “I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany”. Such individual multilingualism, although undoubtedly hierarchical, is therefore reflected in Nabokov's literary work, in which characters are also often polyglot, not only in the strictest sense of the word, but as bearers of cultural values dependent on their mother tongues, whatever idiom they use, almost as if this represented a search for the past they had “lived” in another language.

The last case that we present here is quite different from the previous ones because it has nothing to do with a bilingualism or a literary diglossia of the author (who is however himself also bilingual Afrikaans/English), but with an editorial choice that is, anyway, an expression of his will. We are referring to the South African Nobel Prize winner (2003) John Maxwell Coetzee (Cape Town, 1940) who in a recent interview published in the Argentinean newspaper *Clarín* states that from now on the *editio princeps* of his works will be in Spanish, although he does not know this language and continues to write in English:

Adopta el español como el idioma del que nacen sus ficciones, que posteriormente se traducen a los demás idiomas, inclusive el inglés. *He writes in English, but he has to translate these texts and to put the verse in the castellan as the mother of his words.* Su idilio con este idioma nace de un convencimiento que es al mismo tiempo existencial y filosófico: el inglés se ha apoderado del mundo y impone una perspectiva que, en su opinión, se traduce en una suerte de tiranía ideológica, alejada de una visión plural. Eso es puntualmente, lo que lleva a distanciarse. (Abdala, 2019)

There is no doubt that a choice of this kind may raise some doubts, considering that the author could have chosen to write directly in Afrikaans (his first mother tongue): if certainly in the past the choice of English, aside from obvious commercial reasons, was dictated by the desire to move away from the idiom that had characterised the South African apartheid regime; today, 26 years after the first democratic elections in the country in 1994, this motivation seems honestly implausible. The choice of Spanish, a language that has also had a colonial and imperialist past, seems to be difficult to understand from a purely political and “protest” point of view, as Coetzee seems to understand:

Hace unos años que el poder creciente del inglés lo inquieta y ya no está dispuesto a fomentar su avance ‘como lengua imperialista global’. Esa es la razón por la que – como ya hizo con su anterior libro de relatos, *Siete cuentos morales* –, prefiere lanzar su nueva obra en castellano. Para eso trabaja con una traductora argentina, Elena Marengo – Directora de la Maestría en Traducción de la Universidad de Belgrano – y exige que no se modifique esa versión en ninguna de sus ediciones. Lo que la primera vez pudo leerse como una declaración de intenciones – la adopción del castellano como la lengua de origen de sus libros –, ahora se confirma como una definición de principios. [...] ‘No hay ningún motivo para que mis libros

tengan que salir en inglés', sostiene ahora el autor. 'Primero – explica a Clarín vía mail desde su casa de Australia – porque el tipo de inglés que escribo hoy en día, al final de mi carrera, es bastante abstracto y, para emplear una metáfora, *esarraigado*. Se traduce fácilmente a otros idiomas.' (Abdala, 2019)

Whatever the reason, the fact is that the last novel just issued *La muerte de Jesús* was published in Spanish before any other language.

Although heterogeneous and in any case limited, the individual examples that we have briefly reported here illustrate how the choice of heteroglossia in literature is a tool with a strong impact and widely used in all its possible facets.

Social Level

No less significant is the relationship between language and literature on a social level. From a diachronic perspective, it is widely documented that the standard varieties of many languages, although with obvious local differences, have developed from their written form: Italian (Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Bembo, Manzoni), German (Martin Luther's *Bible*), English (Shakespeare), French (the *Chansons de geste*), Afrikaans (with the first complete translation of the *Bible* published in 1933). And the list could be much longer. Also, from a synchronic perspective, literature has contributed to changing languages, especially when they have had a transnational expansion (primarily English, French, Spanish, Portuguese).

The Level of Language Teaching and Linguistic Education

It is well known that the literary text has often been used as a model for language teaching (Santipolo, 2010), albeit with the problems it has often raised (crystallised language, not up-to-date, courtly, even archaic, etc.). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the linguistic and cultural richness that the literary text can provide, as well as being a specific variety of the language, can still today constitute an excellent basis for language education, provided it is done in the full awareness that it is in any case only one of the possible models to be adopted and

not necessarily the “best”. In this regard, the notion of sociolinguistic adequacy/appropriateness should not be forgotten, often in contrast to the formal correctness that has been used in the past as justification for the choice of literary texts: a pragmatic/functional/communicative value as opposed to an aesthetic/ethical one and therefore questionable and not at all universal.

3. Conclusions

If, as Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) claim: “An act of language is an act of identity”, there is no doubt that this also applies to the literary text and the heteroglottical choices that authors can make. Literature using language is therefore no exception, so much so that it can transform the choice of language into a shibboleth:

⁴ Then Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead, and fought with Ephraim: and the men of Gilead smote Ephraim, because they said, Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites, and among the Manassites.

⁵ And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay;

⁶ Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.” (*The Holy Bible* [King James Version], *Book of Judges*, Chapter 12, verses 4-6)

As can be seen from this passage from the *Bible*, the criterion by which the Galileans recognised their enemies Ephraimites is of a purely linguistic nature. The latter, in fact, were not able to pronounce the voiceless postalveolar fricative at the beginning of the word *shibboleth*⁷

⁷ In Hebrew שְׂבִילֵת can mean both “torrent” and “ear” (grain).

[ˈʃibələθ], not present in their language, pronouncing it instead as a voiceless alveolar fricative [s]. All languages make use of shibboleths with the aim of identifying those who do not belong to a certain speech community or peer group and therefore exclude them from it, a real “linguistic mark”, according to the definition given by Tullio Telmon (1994), who cites, among others, the example of the Dutch who at the end of the Second World War unmasked the Germans remaining in their country by asking them to pronounce the name of the town of Scheveningen. In fact, while in Dutch the graphic sequence <sch> is pronounced [sx], in German it is pronounced [ʃ]. Always according to Telmon a shibboleth is characterised by:

- a. the presence of sounds considered rare in other languages and therefore difficult for a foreigner to articulate;
- b. the juxtaposition of several similar sounds that are difficult to pronounce quickly.

The “widened” interpretation of the linguistic shibboleth lends itself well to its use to describe the meaning and value that language as a choice takes on in the literary text, a value that, like the actual shibboleth, is characterised by an aura of magic and mystery: the same one that Canetti attributed to the “Zaubersprache” the “magic” language spoken by his parents (German) when he did not yet understand it: “Ich glaubte, daß es sich um wunderbare Dinge handeln müsse, die man nur in dieser Sprache sagen könne” (*Die gerettete Zunge*).

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