Twilight Zone of the Tongue: Vignettes of Translingualism

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Four Provocations

Transformation is intrinsic to language. The inner processes of language are *transitional*: in the jumps between the neuronal sensation and the utterance; in the silences that both interrupt communication and make it possible; in language's quavering between sound, tone, and meaning. Language is not a stable entity and is constituted by nothing but its dynamic transformations: this is the atomic structure of what we will name *translingualism*.

Translingualism understands that language is not an abstract idea, but a pattern of experience within language. It feels out the stitches between the different discourses that compose a natural language; it is the energy that allows us to pass from a lover's idiom (promissory) to a labourer's idiom (pragmatic) to a cat owner's idiom (cooing) in the span of minutes. Every idiom within language has its own grammars, syntaxes, and ideals.

Translingualism challenges hegemonic monolingualism from within. Under capitalism, a global, techno-bureaucratic form of monolingualism attempts to commandeer language by bending it to the teleologies of market value, efficiency, and advertising. But monolingualism is susceptible to internally splitting off into creolizations, hybridities, and dialects that forge their own desires and aims. So English, for example, is not a language, but a tool with which to build real, live, active languages. Translingualism is an act of resistance in language against the forces that would narrow its potentials for the sake of consolidating power.

Translingualism affirms that we are all *mono*lingual (because all the languages and idioms we speak make up a continuum that is the singular language of our

subjectivity) and that we are not even *mono*lingual (because no language properly *belongs* to us, and neither language itself nor our subjective grasp of it ever coheres into a monolingual "oneness").

My Own Private Degenerating Mandarin

I left China when I was four years old. I have no memories of China, only a few photographs of the farms I grew up on with my grandmother, and those photographs have supplied me with the retroactive illusion of memory. (Those farmlands are now being seized by the government and turned into high-rise developments—but the horror of contemporary China is a story for another day). In one photo, I'm posing with two parakeets, beaming from ear to ear in my Charlie Brown-esque knit vest. Later my mother would laugh at me when I asked for the story behind this photo. She told me I'd wrung the necks of the parakeets out of curiosity about my own strength.

At age four, one already has a sense of language, a grasp of syntax and a burgeoning base vocabulary. But the brain is still pliable enough to pick up a new language fairly quickly and forge what essentially seems like a "native" competence with that language. Personally, I have no trace of an accent, nor any strangeness of syntax; the only "tell" that fellow "bilingual" speakers have noticed is that I pronounce "sure" like "是," the Chinese word for "being." My parents were conflicted as pedagogues: they wanted me to learn Mandarin but at the same time needed to learn English themselves, so our household ended up speaking a blended Chinglish (hardly uncommon in immigrant households) where we'd sub in and out of languages depending on our comfort levels. "你可以今天不用 computer 行吗？" I grew up flung deep into translingual constellations, and this interweaving hybridity taught me so much about the inherent flexibility of language-systems and their openness to play.

The sounds and rhythms of Mandarin are forgotten nostalgias that haunt me; in my thoughts I still count numbers, work multiplication tables, and identify fruits in Chinese. My English is still half-lit by Mandarin, even as my real knowledge of it has faded into a kindergartener's set of nouns. The rhythms of the Tang poems that my grandparents recited for me still wend their way into how I write poetry, and

in the very musicality of my inner ear, Mandarin composes my sonic unconscious. The language I speak, English, where I feel myself to have the most communicative power, is founded on a loss whose resonant traces shape it in ways that exceed my knowledge and are buried deep in my intuitions:

> 床前明月光，疑是地上霜。
> 举头望明月，低头思故乡。

Li Bai's children's lullaby, perhaps the most popular poem in Mandarin, is one such resonant trace. Here's my best attempt to render its lilt of perfect simplicity into English:

> *before the bed a moonbeam's thrust*
> *moonlight wet the ground like frost*
> *raise your head to see that moon*
> *lower it to know what's lost*
>
> (adapted from my *Storm Work: An Icarus Opera in Three Acts*)

These Mandarin melodies that hum beneath my hearing leads me to assert, in places where one announces one's identity: I'm not bilingual, nor trilingual, *I'm translingual*. For the translingual subject, questions orbit around the daily practices of self-identification: How traumatic is the loss of a language? What kind of development is arrested when the mother tongue's been frozen in time? Why is it that I can't bring myself to sit down and learn Mandarin properly—what am I holding on to in my incomplete, perversely *improper* understanding of it?

Pound I

The translingual has made a traitor of me. My ostensible body is Chinese but I mostly reached a sense of "Chineseness" through the Western tradition's fascination with it. *Portrait of an Asian orientalist*. Barthes's passionate idealization of Japanese language and Zen culture, Pound's praise of the Chinese ideogram and its potential for poetry: their fascination felt kin to mine, spurred as it was by the sense of an

irreducible difference entwined with an essential lack. *Something in the Other held a truth that was missing from their local, Western context*. They found something in Japan or China that their souls were missing in the West, just as I saw their illuminated hunger as the bridge between myself and the homeland I had given up.

Barthes's and Pound's romanticizations of Eastern poetics were deeply sincere, thoroughly researched, and *fruitful*; texts like Barthes's *Empire of Signs* and Pound's *Cathay* were highly influential in generating East-West literary transcultural exchange. If we read them with a critical eye—for these are not faultless texts, and are riddled with their fair share of misunderstandings and essentializations of Eastern culture—we can understand not what defines either Eastern or Western culture but the peculiar transcultural and relational space between them.

Pound worked within an unstable translingual space because he didn't read much Chinese; rather, he used transliterated texts by Ernest Fennellosa as rough guidelines to produce his idiosyncratic English "translations." Here's "Huang Niao" ("Yellow Bird") from the *Book of Classics*, one of the earliest recorded compilations of Chinese folk poetry:

> 黃鳥黃鳥。
> 無集于穀。
> 無啄我粟。
> 此邦之人。
> 不我肯穀。
> 言旋言歸。
> 復我邦族。

This is James Legge's literal version:

> Yellow bird, yellow bird,
> Do not settle on the oaks,
> Do not eat my grand millet.
> The people of this country,
> I cannot dwell with.
> I will return, I will go back,
> Back to my uncles.

And here's Pound's rendition:

> Yaller bird, let my corn alone,
> Yaller bird, let my crawps alone,
> These folks here won't let me eat,
> I wanna go back whaar I can meet
> the folks I used to know at home,
> I got a home an' I wanna' git goin'.
>
> Yalla' bird, let my trees alone,
> Let them berries stay whaar they'z growin',
> These folks here ain't got no sense,
> can't tell them nothing without offence,
> Yalla' bird, lemme, le'mme go home.
> I gotta home an' I wanna git goin'.
>
> Yalla' bird, you stay outa dem oaks,
> Yalla' bird, let them crawps alone,
> I just can't live with these here folks,
> I gotta home and I want to git goin'.
> To whaar my dad's folks still is a-growin'.

Pound transmogrifies these Chinese folk songs into poems composed of patchwork elements from the history of English poetry. He renders the seven-line Chinese poem into two sestets and a quatrain, expanding the rhythms of the poem into an English folk song structure. His vernacular doubles down on the folk song feel, as he transcribes the phonetics of rural American speech—with its own minor variations, like between "yaller" and "yalla"—into a sing-songy cornfield rhythm. The poem's musical urgency matches its message of hostility and a pained nostalgia for the homeland. Pound's deep knowledge of English poetry's history, from its high-cultural intertextuality to its low-cultural vernacular speech, allows him to forge a resonant link between 8th century BCE China and the 19th century American South. He lets the ancient Chinese poem roam over the surface of English poetics, searching for correspondence in affect rather than, as in Legge's version, communication of bare meaning.

In Pound's example, translingual translation expresses not the original text itself, but the crosscultural *act of encounter* between the original and the translation. Such an act necessarily records the imprint of the translingual subject who makes two languages meet in the unformed, undefined middle space between the two languages. No longer a mere translator, Pound is a spiritual medium for the poem. Certainly this is a speculative act, leaping as it does into the abyss of the incommensurable to try to match idioms between languages. But the attempt is inspirational to me, as it passes the spirit of the original Chinese through the prism of English to create a trans-temporal, trans-geographic poem that glints with the original poem's energy. A translingual poetics releases us from the limitations of *accurate meaning*, and allows experimentation, failure, and the unknown to seep into the translated text.

We can be inspired by Pound's avowal of non-mastery as a creative engine, yet at the same time wary of his power as a monolithic English poet who obscures the other via his own vast capacities. This past year I worked with the Koffler Gallery to teach poetry to Mandarin-speaking seniors. It was one of the toughest gigs of my life, especially when I was tasked with live-translating their stories into English, the speed and stakes of which lit up a part of my translingual brain that had long been dormant. But this challenge made it invigorating, as we supplied missing lines in each other's English or Mandarin, bouncing our respective expertises against each other until we found an sufficiently calibrated middle ground. This experience taught me that we can extend a more truly collaborative ethos into Pound's project, one where self and other can interface in the awkward limbo zone of the translingual.

Pound II

I can't blame my parents for not knowing what I desired in language: not the pragmatic, not business Mandarin, not the language naturalized for communication; but its capacity for nuance, its enigmatic formalism: Mandarin's intrinsic aesthetics of elisions and condensation. I found Mandarin classes boring not because they were dull, but because the version of the language we were learning was intended for eventual capitalistic use in the gleaming world of global economics. Mandarin was just a substitute hegemonic monolingualism for English.

Thirteen years old at the back of Mandarin class and the boy beside me whipped out a porno video on his phone and asked me "is she getting pounded in the pussy or the ass?" I hesitated for three seconds, and this moment of hesitation was sufficient signal for this bully: "then you must be a fucking faggot." I felt then a rending jolt of fear: I hadn't yet come out (I was too young to even have formulated an identity to come out as) and yet this boy saw right through me, or at least he *named* me for what I was, even if his cruelty wasn't even sensitive to my sexuality. Worst of all, he was far better at Chinese than I was, having left China later than I did (at age eight). I resented that his swinish machismo didn't translate into incompetence. So while I struggled in every aspect of learning the language, he treated the whole thing as a joke; he lacked all the internal mechanisms that made me — assimilation-hungry as I was back then — resist Mandarin with grit teeth. I knew then what I couldn't have expressed: that my inability to internalize Mandarin was the most painful kind of stupidity, because it also served to sever me from my ancestrality.

That day I felt a kind of negative ecstasy, one that fuses two unlike things together on the basis of shame: homophobia and the unintelligible shadow of a supposed home, China, Chineseness. In my inability to answer the question "pussy or ass" quickly enough I let slip that I was outside the discourse of easy heterosexuality; that I could not read these vulgar signs. In my inability to answer the teacher's questions about the meaning of 骄傲 or 宿舍 I let slip that I could not live up to my own supposed skin; that I could not read these profane signs. I struggled to "pass" into the headspace of Mandarin just as I could not "pass" as a straight boy, at least by this bully's fatal definition.

Schizophrenic Tongues

Louis Wolfson is an American author and schizophrenic whose book *Le Schizo et les Langues* details his virtuosic translingual attempt to avoid ever hearing English. He writes (referring to himself in the third person):

> However, since it was not at all possible to not hear his birth language, he tried to develop the means to convert the words (especially certain ones that he found very annoying) almost instantaneously into foreign words each

> time they would penetrate his consciousness, despite his efforts to not perceive them. He did this in order to imagine that he wasn't spoken to in this damn language, his mothertongue, English. In fact he often cultivated sharp reactions that caused him pain upon listening, if he could not quickly convert, or to destroy in spirit in a constructive manner, the vocables into words that were in foreign languages, these vocables that he had just heard in that godforsaken language, English.
>
> (trans. Nicholas Hauck & Fan Wu)

In order to listen to English such that English is no longer itself, but nonetheless still comprehensible, Wolfson took the component syllables from English and distributed them across four other languages. Gilles Deleuze explains Wolfson's procedure in his introduction to the book:

> His scientific procedure is the following: given a word in the mothertongue, he finds a foreign word with a similar meaning but also having sounds or phonemes in common (preferably in French, German, Russian, or Hebrew, the four main languages studied by the author). A random phrase from the mothertongue will thus be analyzed in its phonetic movements and elements, in order to be converted AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE into a sentence of one or many foreign languages at once… Thus is the general procedure. For example, the phrase don't trip over the wire! becomes tu'nicht (German) trebucher (French) uber (German) eth he (Hebrew) zwirn (German).
>
> (trans. Nicholas Hauck & Fan Wu, emphases mine)

Wolfson's psychosis wasn't "merely" a mental illness—it was a virtuosic manifestation of what a polyglot mind can do, indeed must do, to protect itself from the pain of English. Translingualism for him is a coping mechanism against the intense, unbearable psychic pressure of his mother's speech, which infected any English he heard. The *speed* of this live translation—"AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE"—is essential to fending off the pain, and this speed demanded mastery of Wolfson's four chosen languages: French, German, Hebrew, Russian. Wolfson swaps back and

forth between those four languages to try to keep both considerations of *sound* and *meaning* in play, thus preserving everything about the English original—except its Englishness. The unconscious of a language is composed of other languages, and Wolfson shatters the monolingual surface of his mother's English to let the other always-already interconnected languages show through.

(I feel bad translating Wolfson into English, back into the language that tormented him, the literal mother-tongue that was the tongue-lashing his mother gave him, that led him to flee that doomed English for foreign shores.)

Wolfson is undoubtedly a singular case study for psychoanalysis and the linguistic histories of psychosis. But I take a more general lesson from Wolfson: there's something unbearable about language. (There's something especially unbearable about English, the language of power *par excellence* in the West.) Don't you ever have the impulse to abandon language and the burden of comprehensibility? Language's staunch ambiguities, its capacity for chaos, its rampant associations: all of these risk being lost in communicative language, which forecloses our dream of escaping normative language in order to live in language *otherwise*. Wolfson's genius was that he could disintegrate a language and piece it back together from sounds and shadows borrowed from diverse other languages. In our world of dogmas and domineering discourses, Wolfson's fraught decompositions teach us that every language can be unbuttoned. Communication is only one of the (overstated) functions of language. The translingual is an invitation to play and experiment with language's limitless mutability.