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## MULTILINGUALISM IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETRY

### Abstract

Multilingualism is very much in the air now. Poetic language being inherently receptive to the minute changes in the society could not but reflect this tendency of modern life in its structure and vocabulary. The phenomenon of multilingualism as one of the aspects of poetic speech is the subject of this article. Various types and functions of multilingualism are considered. Special attention is paid to multilingualism as an artistic strategy in the contemporary British poetry.

*Key words:* multilingualism, hybridization, code-mixing, embedded language, language and cultural interaction.

### Introduction

The question of multilingualism in poetry has long been discussed by linguists, literary critics, poets, and psychologists in many aspects: as a means of overcoming limitations of one language and producing a large cosmopolitan and international consciousness, as a way of asserting one's right to write in two or more languages (in case of colonial background) and focusing on national and ethnic awareness, as a technique of creating two or more literary persona, as a stylistic strategy.

Of course, there have always been polyglot poets who wrote in only one language at a time and did not mix them. Such poems can

be found in big numbers in bilingual and multilingual collections of poetry and do not require illustration.

Another traditional practice is the insertion of elements (usually words and word combinations) of another or other languages into the body of a poem, written in English. The principal languages that have been embedded in the texts of English poetry are French, German, Greek and Latin.

A more recent variety of multilingualism is the experimental poetry with elements of linguistic hybridization, which explores the interactions of languages, in particular their semantic and stylistic implications.

Our objective is to consider them in turn with special emphasis on multilingualism as an artistic strategy.

### **Section 1. Writing poems in two or more languages, not mixing them.**

In Britain there is a great number of bilingual poets who, occasionally at least, write in languages connected through a history of colonialism – English and their mother-tongue. In Scotland, for instance, they have a choice of English, Scots and Gaelic. In the past the choice of the language was invariably a matter of national identity, a way of asserting one's right to write in one's mother tongue.

Today questions of ideological and political character cannot also be escaped when a poet chooses to write in Scots or Gaelic in the face of almost exclusive domination of English. But in words of Roderick Watson, “if identity is an issue among contemporary Scottish writers it is more likely to be framed in the contexts of personal, existential, political or sexual being” (164). As an example Watson mentions such women-poets as Magi Gibson, Jackie Kay, Kathleen Jamie and Meg Bateman who explore their generation's experience of being a woman in Scotland.

In Ireland the choice of language is still an acute question of national identity. Some of the poets write in Irish. In Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's poem “The Language Issue” she explains why she writes in Irish, using the im-

age of the reed basket which carried the baby Moses down the Nile as the metaphor for her poetry written in Irish. The Pharaoh's daughter who sees the basket and saves the baby is the future reader.

Bilingualism forms the theme of two essays by a famous Welsh poet Gwyneth Lewis: “Whose coat is that jacket?” and “Whose hat is that cap?” In both essays she emphatically defends her right to write poetry in two languages: in Welsh - her mother tongue and in English, the other language of Wales, which Lewis read as an undergraduate at Cambridge. Explaining her bilingual experience in poetry Gwyneth Lewis compares the strengths and weaknesses of the two languages – English and Welsh. She points out, that “the rationality in English is one of its limitations as a poetic language. Whereas the musicality of Welsh – as with Dylan Thomas, for example – is also its downfall. I like to think *and* be musical. That is an ambition that is a composite one, from both traditions together”.

It is necessary to add, that the metrical patterns of the two languages are also different. English is largely iambic, and Welsh is anapestic. The two rhythms are quite contradictory to each other.

Thus, writing poetry in more than one language gives the poet an opportunity to investigate possibilities of languages involved and the results of their interaction. Besides, the interfusion of two distinct literary traditions

which lies at the core of the understanding of poetic manifestations of different cultures is another important aspect any multilingual poet has to deal with.

## Section 2. English Poetry with embedded elements from other languages.

Some other predominantly bilingual poets mix two languages within one poem. It is sometimes the case when a poet does not feel at home with English and longs for his (her) native language. In Julia Alvarez's poem "Bilingual Sestina" two languages, two cultures are intimately mixed:

Some things I have to say ain't getting said  
in this snowy, blond, blue-eyed, gum-  
chewing English  
dawn's early sifting through persianas  
closed  
the night before by dark-skinned girls  
whose words  
evoke *cama*, *aposenito*, *suenos* in *nombres*  
from that first world I can't translate from  
Spanish.

The poem reflects lonely, longing feelings of the persona, who is torn between the two languages. She chooses to write the poem in English with only a sprinkling of Spanish to stress her fragmented being at the moment.

Another case is with Gwyneth Lewis's poems. Although she predominantly writes in English and Welsh not mixing them, there are a few poems written in English with Welsh in-

sertions. In "Welsh Espionage" Lewis examines her bilingual experience:

Welsh was the mother tongue, English was  
his,  
He taught her the body by fetishist quiz,  
Father and daughter on the bottom stair:  
"Dy benelin yw *elbow*, dy wallt di yw *hair*,  
  
*Chin* yw dy en di, *head* yw dy ben."

She promptly forgot, made him do it again.  
Then he folded her *dwrn* and, calling it fist,  
Held it to show her knuckle and wrist.

"Let's keep it from Mam, as a special surprise.

Lips are *gwefusau*, *llygaid* are eyes."

.....

In the poem Lewis considers the complex process of establishing and violating cultural and linguistic boundaries. The two languages are clashing here and the struggle between them is represented by the change of roles of italicized words. Lewis describes her languages as inextricably bound to each other in her understanding and use of them.

## Section 3. Mixture of languages as an artistic strategy.

For some other contemporary poets the ability to write in more than one language or to mix different languages is, to a great extent, a matter of stylistic choice. For instance, Scots

to W. N. Herbert is part of a broader language spectrum available to the poet. “I’m a polystylist, obsessed by how different modes of writing interact – not just Scots and English, but also formal and free verse, poetry on the page or in performance, long poems, forty-line lyrics. Everything’s a dialect” (170).

W. N. Herbert writes in both English and a kind of experimental “plastic” Scots the bright example of which is his outrageously comic poem “Cabaret McGonagall”. Here is its beginning stanza:

Come as ye dottilt, brain-deid lunks,  
Ye hibernatin cyber-punks,  
Gadget-gadjies, comics-geeks,  
Guys wi perfect rat’s physiqes,  
Fowk wi fuck-aa social skeels,  
Fowk that winnae tak thir pills:  
Gin ye cannae even pley fuitball  
Treh thi Cabaret MacGonagall.

William McGonagall is a poet and tragedian of Dundee, who has been widely hailed as the writer of the worst poetry in the English language. He was a man without talent who thought he was a great poet. Using his name and alluding to a famous American film “Cabaret” and a song from that film, the author creates a parodist critical vision of modern Scotland.

Herbert bases the Scots of his poetry on the dialect of his hometown Dundee, a dialect which stands out due to monophthongisation of [ae] to [e]. He freely modifies the spelling of

some words and introduces his own inventions, which give his poems a convincing personal voice and an estranging effect.

In the Introduction to his collection of poems “The Forked Tongue” Herbert notes “I don’t want to choose between them (English and Scots); I want both prongs of the fork. Aren’t we continually hopping registers like socially-challenged crickets? My motto is *And not Or*” (12).

Another Scottish poet Tom Leonard mixes the English lexis with the urban demotic speech of the West Scotland – further estranged by phonetic transcription:

ma lungs iz fuckt  
bronchitis again  
thi smoakin  
  
lookit  
same awl spliht  
yella ngreen

von goghs palate  
paintn sunflowers

According to Roderick Watson a complex intersection of Scots and English together generates an unusual energy and linguistic fluidity, “despite the fact that MacDiarmid wanted to ascribe it solely and uniquely to Scots alone. And of course within modern Scots itself there is another level of interorientation, made manifest in a wealth of dialects, different registers, hybrid expressions and rhymes

which sometimes draw on the Scots and sometimes on the English form of the same word”(164).

For some other contemporary Scottish poets who write both in English and Scots such as Robert Crawford, Richard Price, David Kinloch, languages talking to languages is a shared theme, for them “language is a field of play”. The same is true about a younger poet Jackie Kay who writes in a mixture of languages. She uses Old Scots in a poem “Fiere”, Shetland dialect in a poem “The Knitter”, Glaswegian in “English Cousin Comes to Scotland”. Then she uses more contemporary Glaswegian and contemporary Scots. “I’m always playing around with the language and one of the fascinating things for a poet is how language is very, very fluid, and how it changes depending on immigration, influx of people, movement to places”.

Merging of languages within one work is often referred to as hybridity or hybridization, a term coined by M. Bakhtin who meant by it a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an “encounter” within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor.

An example of a mixture of languages and dialects is the poem of Tony Harrison “The Ballad of Babelabour” in which the reader comes across German words *Sprache*

and *neue* (written in the Gothic style), French word *merde*, Spanish word *negra*, imitation of the Northern English dialect accent in the word combination “*revurlooshunairy vurse*”, English language grammatical endings added to German words: *Sprachered*, *Sprache's*. This mixture of languages and dialects which alludes to the “Babylonian confusion of words”, mentioned in the epigraph by Bertolt Brecht, is a means of expressing the author's vision of the history of Great Britain and its present day's situation with its mixture of peoples and languages and, in particular, social varieties of the English language and problems resulting from this confusion. It is a deliberate linguistic strategy chosen by the poet for expressing his ideas.

The poem's headline “The Ballad of Babelabour” contains author's nonce-word which can be interpreted in two ways:

1. *Babel + bour*: *Babel* –from story of the Tower of Babel in the Bible and *bour* - an affix in many European names of towns and cities, such as: Bourges, Burgundy, Freiburg, Bournemouth etc.

2. *babel + labour*: *babel* – a scene of confusion, disorder, and the noise of many voices (also associated with *babble* – a confused sound of many people talking at the same time).

The second meaning realized in the poem is the language of workers:

What ur-Sprache did the labour speak?

ur ur ur to t'master's Sprache  
the hang-cur ur-grunt of the weak  
the unrecorded urs of gobless workers

Besides, Harrison uses the symbolism of the Biblical story of Babel to represent his vision of modern poetic language, and his own language which strives all the time to go out beyond the limits of the English language and, probably, his nostalgia for a protolanguage: Ursprache (in the poem “ur-Sprache”) is the German word for a protolanguage from which all other languages have derived.

Multilingualism is a noticeable technique in the poetry of Paul Muldoon, one of Ireland's leading contemporary poets, especially in his poems of the latest period. This practice is not only a means to reflect Muldoon's life experience of emigration and displacement but also an artistic strategy, a means to articulate an experience of cohesive cultural and linguistic practice.

An example of such writing is the poem “Yarrow”, which evokes a blend of history and author's childhood. It embraces a whole range of ideas and events, from colonial encounters through horticulture, philosophy, linguistics and literature to rock music and anthropology. In one of the interviews Paul Muldoon remarks on the subject of his poem in such a way: “It deals with the period of my childhood and has to do with all sorts of adventure stories – the imaginative life. It is the

background of a poet's mind, a child's mind, but written with somewhat loopy style”.

The complexity of the structure of the poem is reflected by its allusiveness – from Camoes to Hart Crane, from Ovid to O'Rahilly. In Jamie McKendrick's view, this can be more playful than purposeful and the fabric of references to adventure stories, chivalric romances and television westerns seem to have become an end in itself, hindering the poem's movement”.

Paul Muldoon has an infinitely resourceful, all-embracing wit, a profound awareness of the possibilities of poetic form and technique. Among the poem's fund of languages there are Latin, French, Spanish, nonce-words based on crafty multilingual pun, place-names, etymologies – Gaelic often shares the line with English.

Muldoon is generous and expansive in his using of names. His poem is peopled at once by Wild Bill Hickok, by Maud Gonne, Sylvia Plath and Michael Jackson brought to life by poet's fantastic imagination. Many critics are stunned by the range of Muldoon's multilingual puns, surprising associations and analogies between apparently unrelated texts and ideas and some call it “an associative madness”.

Bernard O'Donoghue is of a different opinion. He states that all these “are not meant to be persuasive: they are just one way of or-

ganizing material. It's an intertextuality, at one level, it is mocking scholarship”.

The bilingual puns and semantic doubles (Cicero – Caesar, US – USSR, album - white) appear, for example, in Muldoon's epigram on the Beatles' 1968 “White Album”:

Though that was the winter when late each  
night  
I'd put away Cicero or Caesar  
and pour new milk into an old saucer  
for the hedgehog which, when it showed up  
right  
on cue, would set its nose down like that  
flight  
back from the U.S...back from the, yes  
sir...  
back from the...back from the U.S.S.R...  
I'd never noticed the play on “album” and  
“white”.

Stephen Burt, describing this feature of Muldoon's poetry, calls it “alchemic transformations”. “Words, objects and people merge and dissolve into each other – *soutane* into *Soutine*, *Merlin* into *Marilyn*” (19-20). Such

mutability creates fluidity and ambiguity which are especially characteristic of Paul Muldoon's later work.

It is difficult not to agree with Maria Johnston's remark that Paul Muldoon's poetry shows how “the poetic text can become a space for linguistic fertilization and the exploration of idiomatic texture of interacting languages”.

### Conclusion

Poetic language is inherently receptive to the minute changes in the society and reflects them in its structure and vocabulary. Multilingualism is very much in the air now. The postmodern cultural mood makes multilingual experiments a significant feature of literary art. The element of play in modern multilingual poetry is very strong, but it goes far beyond that. It turns into an exploration of the expressive resources of interacting languages and cultures and becomes the potential for a more authentic form of representation.

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