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Multilingualism of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and problems of its translation and teaching in Georgian¹

ABSTRACT

Hailed as one of the most enigmatic and puzzling books of the 20th century James Joyce's last novel *Finnegans Wake* does not cease to interest scholars, translators and readers even after 80 years since its publication. The novel attracts people of various nationalities, as well as professions due to its multilingualism and multi-layered intertextuality, which is highly suggestive and open to interpretation.

Joyce's attempt to create a new language by using and combining over 60 languages puzzles the readers and is one of the main issues that make *Finnegans Wake* so "incomprehensible" and difficult to read, analyze and translate. However, at the same time, it is this multilingualism of the text that makes it accessible to people of various nationalities.

The present paper studies some problems which arise from the multilingualism of the text when translating and teaching it in Georgian. It is stated that difficulties of translating (and teaching) such a text in Georgian arise from the linguistic differences between Georgian and languages belonging to West-European Family, which are the linguistic basis of the text at large.

At the same time, teaching *Finnegans Wake* by the method of close-reading in a group consisting of various nationalities and backgrounds proves to be an interesting experience, as multilingual group can add valuable contribution to the reading process.

Key Words: *Multilingualism, James Joyce, Finnegans Wake, Translation, Teaching*

Introduction

Literature as a verbal art has always been concerned with language as a medium of expression. However, with

James Joyce language also becomes one of the problems which reveals itself both on the thematic level (language is one of the many themes that his characters are

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concerned with and which is often debated (*Dubliners*, *The Portrait* and *Ulysses*) and on the linguistic level where Joyce as a writer endeavors to push the possibilities of the language to its uttermost, so as to create a Language which is 'different from itself' (Derrida).

Joyce's whole writing carrier can be viewed as a search for a new language. Starting from the rejection of the Irish language (*Dubliners*, *The Portrait*) and alienation towards English as the language of the invaders (*The Portrait*) through the eclectic, allusive style drawn from many languages in *Ulysses* and on to his final work *Finnegans Wake* where Joyce endeavors to create a multilingual text with numerous connotations and infinite contextual associations.

At a glance, *Finnegans Wake* is a story about "one night" in the life of an ordinary Irishman - Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker and his family, but by extensive use of literary, biblical, and mythological allusions, Joyce creates a multilayered, intertextual text open to interpretation in which Earwicker and his family become an archetypal image of the

Family and one night turns into the history of mankind.

James Joyce and Multilingualism:

Revolution of the Word

James Joyce grew up in an environment where language was a subject of constant worry. As an Irishman, he considered English as "borrowed" and at the same time was enraged by the fact that the Irish were "condemned to express themselves in a language not their own" (Joyce, 1957: p. 226). Joyce started expressing his discontent, and the feeling of estrangement from the English language even in his first novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when Stephen while speaking to the English-born Dean of Studies reflects: "The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home*, *Christ*, *ale*, *master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds

them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language” (Joyce, 1960: p.189).

After studying French and Italian at University and then abandoning Dublin and moving from one European city to another, Joyce not only acquired various languages, but started experimenting with all the “linguistic corpses” bothering him from the inside, which can be traced in *Ulysses*. This experimentation with the language took radical forms in *Finnegans Wake*. In a letter written to his benefactor Harriet Weaver in 1925 Joyce wrote: “I know language is no more than a game, but it is a game that I have learned to play in my own way” (Ellmann, 1959: p. 594). Moreover, language became “a game” whose rules Joyce disregarded in *Finnegans Wake* as he had “declared war” on the English language (Joyce, 1957: p. 237). Juliette Taylor-Batty in *Protean Mutations: James Joyce's Ulysses* points out wisely, that “In the fiction of Lawrence, Richardson, Mansfield and Rhys, linguistic plurality and mixing, even when it is constitutive of style, is always treated with some degree of ambivalence, some sense of loss. In Joyce’s work, we find a shift in perspective

whereby the awareness of linguistic plurality and arbitrariness becomes a seemingly endless source of poetic possibility” (Taylor-Batty, 2013: p. 113).

Thus, the foremost problem with *Finnegans Wake* is that it as if unites disunited languages again and “it talks several languages at once” (Derrida, 1984: p. 127). Joyce attempts to “babelize” words by giving them simultaneous existences in different languages, taking them back to the tower of Babel, right before “sense emerged in disunited languages” (European Joyce Studies, 1990). It is noteworthy that Laurent Milesi connects this with the man's fall: “like the Bible, *Finnegans Wake* leitmotivistically repeats a few basic narrative patterns and just as the Bible parallels man's arrogant construction of the Babel Tower, from which sense emerged in disunited languages, with the sexual sin consumed by eating from the tree of knowledge, thus drawing language and sex together, the *Wake's* quest for the protohero's sexual fall in the Phoenix Park is equated with the *felix culpa* of language, the medium which enables it to

be forever conducted" (European Joyce Studies, 1990).

Hence, *Finnegans Wake* is "a novel of Babelian excess" as Milesi calls it. Joyce's cultural and ideological estrangement from the language became fundamental in using, misusing and abusing the English language. When Stephen in *A Portrait* suggests that "I have not made or accepted its words" (Joyce, 1960: p. 189) it also implies that he wants to make his own words, which Joyce achieves masterfully in his last novel *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce seems to disregard the difficulties that his proto-language will cause for his potential readers, but follows the sense of *Non Serviam* expressed by Stephen's character at the dawn of Joyce's literary career.

Joycean multilingualism and the importance of language are underlined by Tim Robbins, contemporary American novelist, who in one of his interviews, while talking about *Finnegans Wake* says the following: "[...] the language in it is incredible. There's so many layers of puns and references to mythology and history. [...] He wrote that book the way that the human mind works. An intelligent, inquiring mind. And that's just the way

consciousness is. It's not linear. It's just one thing piled on another. And all kinds of cross references. [...] There's never been a book like it and I don't think there ever will be another book like it. And it's absolutely a monumental human achievement" (Richards, 2002).

Thus, while writing his earlier works, Joyce was concerned by the fact that "I cannot express myself in English without enclosing myself in a tradition" (Joyce, 1957: p. 397), in *Finnegans Wake* it becomes apparent that Joyce has liberated himself from this tradition. As Joyce remarked, 'I have put the language to sleep' (Ellmann, 1983: p. 543).

Difficulties of Translating and Teaching *Finnegans Wake* in Georgian

The multilingual language of *Finnegans Wake* with its ambiguity, polysemy, opaqueness, the violation of grammatical and logical sequences which at one and the same time are deviations from the English and at the same time show the capacity of the language when it is pushed to its utmost makes the translation of *Finnegans Wake* a rather

hard although at the same time an exciting experience.

The notion that *Finnegans Wake* is “untranslatable” has become some kind of a cliché in Joyce scholarship. Umberto Eco even claimed that *Finnegans Wake* is “pointless to translate” because, by virtue (or vice) of its multilingualism, it is already translated. In spite of critics claim about the books ‘untranslatability’ *Finnegans Wake* has been translated into numerous languages.

Translators of Joyce in general and particularly *Finnegans Wake* need to strive in particular against two tendencies that are apparent in the process of translation:

- 1) the tendency to homogenise the source text, especially where the target language is present as an embedded language within the source text (Grutman, 1988: p. 160)
- 2) the tendency to correct ‘errors’ in the source text.

As Fritz Senn notes, ‘apparent flaws are ironed out in translations; arrangements become more orderly. [...] Errors are prone to being inertly rectified’ (Senn,

2010: p. 537). Therefore, we can argue that to correct is to homogenise.

These difficulties and tendencies are common to all translators working to render Joyce’s texts into another Indo-European Language. However, there are some specific difficulties which a translator into Georgian will encounter. We will point out a few of them. These difficulties take the origin in the linguistic and cultural differences. *Finnegans Wake* with its multilingualism is deeply rooted in the Indo-European languages whereas Georgian belongs to the Kartvelian languages, (which consists of four closely related languages (Georgian, Svan, Megrelian (chiefly spoken in Northwest Georgia) and Laz (chiefly spoken along the Black Sea coast of Turkey, from Melyat, Rize, to the Georgian frontier) and has very little in common with Indo-European family.

Linguistic difficulties of translating this multilingual text into Georgian are the following:

1. The vocabularies of the majority of West-European languages have a lot in common due to their genetic relationship. Besides, their

alphabets have one and the same origin. Whereas the Georgian language has very little lexical similarity and its own Georgian script that makes no distinction between upper and lower case. When we have to deal with a multilingual text like *Finnegans Wake* these differences put a reader and a translator of West-European origin in a privileged position.

2. Georgian grammar is remarkably different from those of European languages and has many distinct features, such as split ergativity and a polypersonal verb agreement system;
3. Personal pronouns (he/she/it) in Georgian has only one equivalent – *is* (ის), without specifying the gender. The same is true in regard to possessive pronouns, where the language does not distinguish between his/her/its and all of them is translated into *misi* (მისი).

For a clearer picture, let us discuss one relatively simple sentence on page 485 from the text which reads as follows: “Are

we speachin d'anglas landadge or are you sprakin sea Djoytsch?” (FW 485: pp.12-13). Even with a basic knowledge of English, French and German the reader can understand that Joyce is using a mixture of these three languages, but not in the ‘normal’ way i.e. using words of three different languages. Instead, Joyce creates new words where the stem of the word might be German and the suffix might come from English. Thus when translating it either in French or German it is possible to render the wordplay as at least a part of the word is already present. However, no matter how creative and inventive a Georgian translator might be this wordplay seems impossible to recreate. In Georgian “speachin/sprakin” is ‘*saubari/laparaki*’ (საუბარი, ლაპარაკი), “d'anglas” *inglisuri* (ინგლისური), “Djoytsch” *germanuli* (გერმანული). What is more it is virtually impossible to translate the word created by Joyce “landadge” which is coined from two words: land and language (in Georgian: ‘*mitsa/ena*’ (მიწა, ენა), which alludes to a very important issue in Joyce’s works: his motherland from which he exiled himself and his mother-

tongue, which was the language of the invaders. It is virtually impossible to convey the word play: “sea” which on one hand is “Sea”(ზღვა, which is one of the important images of the book) and on the other, refers to the German word “Sie” (თქვენ). So, it is quite obvious that even one short sentence which seems relatively easy in Joyce’s multilingual hypertext raises a number of difficulties for the translator.

Another issue to discuss is Latin names, words and phrases which abound in the text. Joyce, who got education in a Jesuit College was more than well-versed in Latin. And once again, when dealing with them the translator into Georgian will encounter different problems than those whose target language is West-European where many words are derived from Latin and can easily be left in the translation as they appear in Joyce’s text.

An interesting example could be the speech of *Justius* and *Mercius* (Book I, chapter VII). These names are interesting in several regards. As neither *Justius* nor *Mercius* are distinct personalities in Roman history (as far as the annotation to the text suggest), they presumably

attracted Joyce’s attention because of their names (which imply ‘Justice’ and ‘Mercy’). Once again as in the example given above, a reader and a translator into a West-European language, particularly for those belonging to the Roman Languages will have no difficulty with these names. However, it is impossible to leave these names as they are in Georgian as the implied allusion will be lost. Thus, although proper names are not translated, this seems to be a different case, as the bear meaning. Therefore, the best option for the translator seems to create a new Latinized name, which would convey the meaning of “justice” and “mercy” into Georgian. Thus *Justius* would become – *Samartlianus* (სამართლიანუსი) and *Mercius* - *Mitevebius* (მიტევებიუსი).

JUSTIUS (to himother)

სამართლიანუსი (ძმასა თვისსა)

MERCIUS (of hisself): Domine
vopiscus! (FW 193:31)

მიტევებიუსი (სპონტანურად):

Domine vopiscus!

The Latin exclamation by *Mercius* is in Latin and implies a whole range of interpretations. ‘Domine’ means ‘O Lord’ and the word ‘vopiscus’ could allude to a

Latin praenomen originally given to a child whose twin brother or sister was born dead. At the same time Joyce scholars remark, that the phrase may allude to ‘Dominus vobiscum’ which is an ancient salutation and blessing traditionally used by the clergy in the Catholic Mass. In this case, the best decision is to leave the Latin phrase in the text and put its translation as well as the possible allusions in the notes. The decision deems justified as stylistically the sentence in Latin makes perfect sense with *Mitevebius*, who himself is of Latin origin.

Thus, while translating *Finnegans Wake*, the translator should not aim at conveying all the possible meanings that Joyce might have meant (as it would be impossible), but to interpret the text in such a way that it becomes accessible for the readers in the target language. As Joyce himself outlined “One should not pay any particular attention to the allusions to placenames, historical events, literary happenings and personalities, but let the linguistic phenomenon affect one as such” (Straumann, 1949: p.114).

Apart from translating *Finnegans Wake*, teaching and explaining it to

students might also seem troublesome, but at the same time it can be a lot of fun as well. As Dora Garcia noted: “Reading had always been a group experience” (Garcia, 2013). Reading as a group experience could be particularly rewarding in a multilingual class.

Reading and Teaching *Finnegans Wake*, especially in a multi-lingual group, might prove rather helpful in this case, because as Dora Garcia notes “I have never known of any other book that creates such a specific, distinct, dedicated population—an irreverent community, a brotherhood without any hierarchies. The society created by the *Wake* is one of the most fascinating aspects of the text. Many idées reçues about language, literature and reading explode into pieces with readers of the *Wake*: there are no authorities, just people who devote a lot of time to the text; **it is not really written in English, therefore English native speakers are in no better position to read it**” (Garcia, 2013).

The advantages of reading *Finnegans Wake* in a multilingual group lies also in the background, education and experiences that this or that nationality might hold. For example, “regginbrow”

(FW 3:14) at the very beginning of the novel has multiply meanings and involves multiple languages as well: *regina* (Latin) - a queen + *Regen* (German) - rain + *Regenbogen* (German) – rainbow; thus, in a classroom with the students who have a knowledge of Latin or German, this “complicated” word will require no explanation.

As there are quite a few Armenian students at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, a good example may be the sentence from page 69, where Joyce writes “The **doun** is theirs and still to see for **menags** if he strikes a **lousavoritch** and we'll come to those **baregazed**” (FW 69: 11-12), where ‘doun’ in Armenian means house, ‘menag’ - solitary, alone; *Lousavorich* or *Illuminator* is the title given to Saint Gregory, first patriarch of Armenia, and ‘barekeadz’ means living a good life; Thus, reading this passage packed with Armenian words, will make it rather easy for the students of Armenian background. As Joyce himself remarked, it is of no vital importance for everybody to make sense from every single word: “You are not Irish”, he said, “and the meaning of some passages will

perhaps escape you. But you are Catholic, so you will recognize this or that allusion. You don't play cricket; this word may mean nothing to you. But you are a musician, so you will feel at ease in this passage. When my Irish friends come to visit me in Paris, it is not the philosophical subtleties of the book that amuse them, but my memories of O'Connell's top hat.” (Potts, 1979: p. 223).

The same opinion was expressed by Robert Anton Wilson, American author, novelist, essayist, editor, playwright and poet who also stressed the importance of reading *Finnegans Wake* in a group: “The best way to approach *Finnegans Wake* is in a group. It has to be stalked like a wild animal, and you need a hunting party. I'd been reading *Finnegans Wake* alone for many years before I discovered this....It was Tindall, I think, who was the first to say *Finnegans Wake* has to be read aloud. The second thing is - it's best in groups.”

Thus, the best way to approach the text when teaching it is close-reading of small extracts with a group of students. This is the practice which is followed by many Joyce research centers (e.g. Zurich James Joyce Foundation runs permanent

reading groups which is led by Fritz Zenn and participants come from different backgrounds and nationalities) and which we have also found most rewarding when working with students.

Conclusions

Difficulties of translating (and teaching) a multilingual inter-textual text like *Finnegans Wake* into Georgian arise from the linguistic differences between Georgian and languages belonging to West-European Family, which are the linguistic basis of the text at large. However, the concept that the book is 'untranslatable' has been proved wrong as *Finnegans Wake* has already been

translated into many languages (among them in Japanese, Chinese, Turkish). Thus, despite the discrepancy in languages and cultural background the translator has to transpose the ambiguities of Joyce's language into the translation itself, creating new words and deconstructing Georgian as Joyce's original text deconstructed English.

Teaching *Finnegans Wake* by the method of close-reading in a group consisting of various nationalities and backgrounds proves to be an interesting experience, as multilingual group can add valuable contribution to the reading process.

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