(M)Other Tongues

(M)Other Tongues:
Literary Reflexions on a Difficult Distinction

Edited by

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Do you can their tantrist spellings?
I can lese, skillmistress aiding.

Finnegans Wake 571:6-7

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(M)OTHER TONGUES: ON TRACKING A PRECISE UNCERTAINTY

JULIANE PRADE

I Irritation with a word interrupts a conversation about the theory of aesthetics in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The cone-shaped vessel through which oil is poured into a lamp: Is it called "funnel" or "tundish"? The aspiring writer Stephen Dedalus knows the object by the name of tundish; the English dean of his college in Dublin calls it a funnel instead, and is astonished that it would have a different name in Ireland. And indeed it does not. The irony highlighting the history of the English language is that the word unknown to the Englishman is slightly older and not of French but—unlike the word he does know—actually of Anglo-Saxon origin.[1] Yet however the object is called through which the oil is poured, it lights an extensive blaze in Stephen:

> The little word seemed to have turned a rapier point of his sensitiveness against this courteous and vigilant foe. He felt with a smart of dejection that the man to whom he was speaking was a countryman of Ben Jonson. He thought:
>
> —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. (P 159)

Stephen does not only comment on the sense of not being regarded a proper native speaker of English by the dean but, moreover, articulates his estrangement from the English language. The Irishman Stephen, who speaks no Gaelic, has no other tongue than his mother tongue English as his first language. Still, the English language does not seem to be as native to him as the organ of his tongue. There is a gap. And an essential feature of the irritation arising in the *Portrait* is that the gap is vague. For on the one hand, Stephen's remark refers to the paradoxical situation particular to Ireland: "My ancestors threw off their language and took another, Stephen

said. They allowed a handful of foreigners to subject them." (P 170) Albeit not having become English, the Irish have come to speak the language of the English conquerors as their mother tongue, and thus have to strive to acquire and revitalize the former Irish native language Gaelic. To Stephen, this is exactly what subjugation and oppression means. Yet in articulating this notion, on the other hand, Stephen formulates a paradox, truistic critique pertaining to everyone who speaks a language: English, he says, will always be "an acquired speech" for him. Yet every language is acquired, even the one usually called "native" as if it was innate. And to the extent that every language is acquired, it seems rather trivial to note about a conversation with an older person such as the dean that "[t]he language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine." Furthermore, it seems peculiar to hold a language "at bay" by noting: "I have not made or accepted its words." Joyce ironically refutes Stephen's refusal by wording his thoughts in the very language he declines to pronounce. Far from nullifying his remark, however, this contradiction illustrates that the gap Stephen notices indeed pertains to everyone who speaks a language. It is worth taking the *Portrait* at its word:

Does anyone *make* the words of the language he or she speaks? Or are the words of a language merely *accepted* by whoever learns it? A core problem of Stephen's complaint is that although everyone *acquires* language, it does not become his or her own tongue. For just as the dean did not know the word "tundish," Stephen was unaware of the word "funnel." Having acquired a particular language first, which makes one a so-called native speaker of this language, apparently does not mean that one is in full possession of it—as it would be, Stephen's complaint seems to suggest, if one did not only accept but make the words of one's language. Ludwig Wittgenstein took the time to prove that a self-made "private language" would hardly serve the purposes of a language (1958, §269). The future author of *Ulysses* suggests that the protagonist of the *Portrait* might not yet be an artist as he ignores that the "making"—the Greek verb *poiein*—that literally makes the *poet* also means "inventing," in Latin *invenire*, that is "finding": Poets find new articulations, words, and images, thus widening the scope of the first accepted, traditional words and structures of a language. As Dante Alighieri expounds in *De vulgari eloquentia*, inventing standard Italian meant *accepting* the plurality of vernacular idioms spoken in Italy as the fund out of which to *make* a literary language by way of variation (1996, 1.XVI.6:38-40).[2]

This is the first point the title of this volume—*(M)Other Tongues*—seeks to highlight: A mother tongue always remains an "other" tongue, comprising forms other than the familiar ones: unknown words, unheard

pronunciations, expressions and phrasings unheard-of. Geoffrey Chaucer addressed this variety as the concern to be understood despite the fact that "ther is so gret diversite / In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge" (1957, 479: 1793-1794). Like in a foreign language, there always remains a realm yet to explore in the first language, or mother tongue—which is, therefore, not one singular, homogeneous language, but a plurality of possible expressions, and hence a different tongue for every speaker. This hermeneutic difficulty is what Stephen Dedalus explains to the dean when the "funnel/tundish" interferes, yet his outline tries to limit the plurality to two opposites: "One difficulty, said Stephen, in esthetic discussion is to know whether words are being used according to the literary tradition or according to the tradition of the marketplace." (P 157)

II Concerning the inherent foreignness of mother tongue(s), it is of little importance what terminology is used in order to set this one particular language apart from others. For regardless of how this language is called, the denotation will always be misleading. It may be called "father tongue" as in classical Latin, *sermo patrius* (Horace, *Ars poetica* 57) or *lingua patria* (Ovid, *Tristia* 4.4.5), that is the tongue that comes with the per se paternal heritage and the homeland (*patria*)—but it is not necessarily learned from the father. Alternatively, it can be called "mother tongue," a term to which the Latin shifted in the wake of Christianization (Spitzer 1948)—still, it is not inevitably the mother's first language or taught by the mother. It can be called "native language" as in Russian, *rodnoj jazyk*, which is literally the tongue associated with birth and origin (*rody*) as if it was the language one is born to speak—when it is not inevitably the (sole) language native of the place where one is born and the language is learned. It can even be called "arterial language" in order to designate it as the main channel of communication—and, still, this language will not prove to be as exclusively and irreplaceably one's own as the blood circulating in one's arteries. Equally contestable are, of course, the assumptions that the father, the mother, the home, or the body have no unknown, foreign, or hidden aspect, so that they can serve as figures of an allegedly utterly familiar language. Yet these terminological difficulties indicate the complication in the very concept of drawing a clear dividing line between one language that is supposedly the speaker's "own" and particular of him in contrast to other, consequently foreign languages. And yet, in spite of all the difficulties it brings about, there is an undeniable need, even a necessity to set the one language apart from others that is at the same time "so familiar and so foreign," as Stephen Dedalus says. The irreducible need to

differentiate between the mother tongue and other tongues is the second point the title *(M)Other Tongues* seeks to embrace.

Oddly enough, it is especially with authors whose texts question both the need and the possibility to differentiate between languages, that one is informed, first of all, about their first language and its historical, cultural, and sociolinguistic state. Reading on texts by, for instance, Samuel Beckett, Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, or Paul Celan, one is told the respective author's "first language"—his tongues of departure, as it were. Such biographical information is supposed to be an aid to orientation, and it certainly serves this purpose. Such orientation appears to be all the more necessary if a language is not a national language, if the cultural geography is not congruent with the political one, as is the case more often than not. Yet the biographical approach to defining an author's mother tongue leaves room for doubt, too. In his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov—usually considered a native speaker of Russian—insists that when he was six years old, "my brother and I could read and write English but not Russian (except the words KAKAO and MAMA)." (1966, 28) It is hard to deny that fluency in perceiving and producing written language is as important to the biography of an author as fluency in speaking.

The term "first language" does not solve all the complications evoked by the attempt to distinguish one primary and principal language from others. For rather than merely leaving room for doubt, the biographical approach indispensable to defining an author's first language indeed opens up more questions, thus making the distinction appear even more volatile: Is it the chronologically first language or the one primarily used?—in speaking or in writing?—in writing what: texts for publication or just any scribbling? The more precisely the difference between the mother tongue and other languages is to be defined, the more this distinction appears to disperse.

III Nevertheless, blurring or undermining the dividing line between a mother tongue and other tongues raises emotions. It provokes a sense of insecurity and hence fear as Franz Kafka notes in a text entitled "Introductory Talk on Jargon," which is to say on the Yiddish language. Kafka assures the audience that they understand much more of this language than they think they do. It is just that they will not understand anything as long as they are afraid of, let alone arrogant towards Yiddish (1993, 188/1989, 263). Kafka continues to depict the causes of fear and arrogance—and of why Yiddish cannot be translated into German, the language of Kafka's text. (192/265) Both are due to what seems to be the particular structure of "Jargon," or, rather, its non-structure: Of the same medieval origin as what

has become modern High German, Kafka expounds, Yiddish developed differently as it did not form a standardized version but a multiplicity of dialects, included words of about a dozen of other languages, and has no obligatory grammar. (189-190/264) Yiddish, or "Jargon," cannot be translated into German since it essentially *is* German, yet it crosses German like a Creole, articulates alternative versions of it, and infuses foreign tongues into it. Therefore, Kafka says, "everyone who has knowledge of the German language is able to understand Jargon."[3] The Yiddish Kafka describes, however, calls the very concept of a language as one coherent, uniform, and distinct structure into question. (And as far as the German language is concerned, that concept dates only from the nineteenth century.) In order to understand "Jargon," one has to leave the concept of a language as a single, distinguishable structure behind. And by the time you understand "Jargon," Kafka concludes, "you will be afraid, yet no longer of Jargon but of yourself."[4] Understanding "Jargon" induces fear because it means, even though not speaking in tongues, at least "comprehending in tongues." It means comprehending that when being a so-called native speaker of German enables one to understand the Yiddish tongue, the German language—and indeed every language—must itself be structured just like "Jargon": consisting by no means only of a standardized version, but comprising a virtually infinite number of grammatical, lexical, and phonetic varieties as well as fragments of other languages. Hence no language, not even one's mother tongue, is either *one*, or one's *own* tongue.

Yet what is language if there is no such thing as one language in contrast to others? Raising this question is how Joyce finds a way out of the Irish English paradox. Joyce traces other tongues in what Stephen cannot regard as his native language—most resolutely in *Finnegans Wake*, where he points out etymological as well as phonetic connections between words of a multitude of languages and combines them into portmanteau-words. What Kafka describes and Joyce demonstrates is the third point the title *(M)Other Tongues* intents to call attention to: Every language is linked to other tongues. Phenomena such as loanwords and homonyms make it seem impossible to speak exclusively one's mother tongue without simultaneously voicing other languages. Texts by Joyce, Kafka, Beckett, or Oskar Pastior trace historical as well as formal links between languages, such as graphic or phonetic parallels that may be accidental but yield semantic effects. These texts suggest that a language is not a pre-determined set of words, rules, and idioms, but an interminable multitude of varieties thereof that grants the possibility to find one's tongue—to form, as *Finnegans Wake* (71.1) formulates, one's "langwedge": one's piece of language.

IV *Finnegans Wake* raises emotions, too: Nabokov calls it a "dull and formless mass" (1973, 71). Other than Stephen says about the words of English, the words of the synthetic tongue of *Finnegans Wake* are indeed self-made. Yet no one can acquire the idiom of that text. On the contrary, in order to do what Joyce does, and in order to comprehend it in reading his text, one needs to have acquired a large number of languages first—which takes us back to the start where Stephen says that English "will always be for me an acquired speech." Yet what, again, does it mean to *acquire* a language if it does not mean that one will be in possession of all of its forms one day? Does it indeed mean to both make *and* accept the words of a language, as Stephen says? According to Roman Jakobson (1982/168) it does: The phonetic variations of infantile language acquisition change a language's phonetic structure, Jakobson says. This model can be expanded on lexical and grammatical changes children introduce to a language, so that individual language acquisition and overall historical language change appear as one process: Children do not merely *accept* or imitate the words they learn but, rather, form (*make*) the language anew, and thereby change it, as Jakobson says: "The child creates as [it] borrows." (1968, 14)[5] This means that by the time a child has acquired fluency in its mother tongue, the latter is no longer the language of the child's mother or father, no longer the language the child was taught.

This is the forth and possibly the most important point the title *(M)Other Tongues* seeks to highlight: A language only becomes a mother tongue by way of altering it, by creating new forms, by making it an "other" tongue. The change that takes place in acquiring a mother tongue is, as Jakobson says, "not an alien modification forced upon the linguistic system" (1968, 18/cf. 1982, 16). Rather, that change is a demand, even an imperative inherent to language. Literary texts answer this demand. A main feature of literary language, setting it apart from other forms of speech, is that it formally and semantically transcends the rules and conventions it implies and applies, so that literary texts both speak and alter a language. Changes children and teenagers introduce to a language are often disputed and despised. Literary texts that tongue alterations and thus demonstrate both the possibility and the necessity to alter language may raise emotions no less since they point out that in spite of not being a child any more, one never ceases to acquire one's first language. Literary texts are such that point out that a mother tongue is an "other" tongue in all of the respects expounded above.

The structural character of the distinction between languages is *precise uncertainty*: It is precise insofar as it can be exemplified with an indefinite number of words and phonetic, grammatical, semantic, or syntactic rules.

Yet in spite of such ample illustration the differentiation between languages still remains uncertain because it cannot be abstracted from the examples.[6] The differentiation between languages resists theoretical grasp just as much as the distinction between the mother tongue and other tongues does. The persistent myth of Babel as well as the equally persistent search for a temporal and local fixation of the (one) origin of language—from pharaoh Psamtik's language deprivation experiment as told in Herodotus' *Histories* (2.2) to the primal scenes drawn by Condillac, Rousseau, Locke, or Herder, and further to the abundant approaches in linguistics, cognitive biology (Fitch 2004), and evolutionary anthropology (Tomasello 2008)—are attempts to compensate for the lack of terminological grasp by means of a scenario, a narrative. For the most part, however, these attempts do not reflect on the status of these narratives. As something that has to be *told* apart, and that remains an ever ongoing tale, putting up a lasting resistance to theory (to quote Paul de Man), the distinction between languages—indeed their very distinguishableness—is a key problem of literary criticism: The differentiation between languages is at the same time necessary and impossible. It is indispensable in order to learn a language, to use a dictionary, and to read a text. Yet literary texts are precisely those that question this distinction by way of articulating the linkages between languages, thus unfolding the foreignness even of one's mother tongue.

Cultural hybridity has become an increasingly discussed phenomenon in and beyond the studies of languages and literatures. It is regarded mostly in historical, sociological, linguistic, and psychoanalytical terms, such as (post-)colonialism, exilic or diasporic identities, creoles, and the displaced other within language. What is thus discussed is how historical, sociological, linguistic, or psychoanalytical terms and problems are mirrored in literature. It is rarely considered that in reflecting cultural and political changes, literary texts have challenged and modified the notion of language throughout history—and that the latter might indeed be the precondition of the former.

V Jakobson's explanation of infantile language acquisition (as an actual language creation by way of borrowing) poses a question: In learning and speaking a so-called foreign language, is there a permission and imperative to alter that language, too? If there is none, if one has to follow the fixed rules and to imitate the set vocabulary: Is it at all a language that one acquires?—if a language is exactly not merely a pre-determined set of words and rules, but an interminable multitude of varieties thereof that grants the possibility to find one's tongue. And if the licence to alter it

should be what sets a native language apart from foreign languages, as one might be inclined to affirm: How, then, is one to read texts by authors who do not write in what biographers have found to be their particular mother tongues? Are alterations of the languages in which these authors write to be read as mere mistakes and oddities, irregular imports of their mother tongue into the "other" tongue? If that was the case, it would be impossible to actually read these texts. For then the authors' biographies would be a predetermination to any reading, and reading itself a mere fault-finding, an examination of whether these authors have mastered the rules of the respective foreign language. Still, this notion is to be found regularly.

It is articulated in a milder version when Edzard Obendiek, commenting on the "funnel/tundish"-passage in Joyce's *Portrait*, speculates that Joyce might only have been able to deconstruct English the way he does in *Finnegans Wake* (namely "without inhibition") because English was his first, yet not his mother tongue. For, writes Obendiek: "This is not how one treats the mother." (2000, 174; my translation) The violence of the recurrent vision of the mother on her deathbed haunting Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* tells otherwise. The mother, whose apparition infiltrates her son's thoughts and speech, seems as traumatizing as the mother tongue: Not chosen, and insofar arbitrary, the mother as well as the mother tongue—and their respective social, historical, and cultural context—are almost all-determining for the child. Deconstructing both of them, and the inhibition to do so, is urgently necessary to find one's tongue.

Commenting texts along biographical lines, however, often replaces reading. The biographical approach is popular because it frees from the necessity of having to wonder if Joyce's treatment of English shows something that pertains not only to him and Ireland, but to the English language, its colonial past, the problem of the mother, and indeed to every language, to language in general—something that might question the supposed stability of the commentator's language, whichever it is, and thus evoke fear, as Kafka suggests.

The notion that in a foreign language authors do not have the same licence to alter its forms and conventions they would be granted if the language was their mother tongue is to be found in a more rigid form, too. Virginia Woolf notes

> that the men and women who began writing novels in 1910 or thereabouts had this great difficulty to face—that there was no English novelist living from whom they could learn their business. Mr. Conrad is a Pole; which sets him apart, and makes him, however admirable, not very helpful. (Woolf 1981, 98-99)

Why would Conrad not be "helpful," neither in learning what to do as an author, nor in learning what to avoid? It is Woolf who "sets him apart" as "a Pole," as if to say that Conrad's texts are none to alter the English language, that they at best tongue a strictly "Conradian" idiolect.[7] When writing about Conrad, biographers and scholars rarely forget to mention that his English had a strong Polish accent as it was not his first language, "but quite probably his fourth, following Polish, French and most likely Russian" (Morzinsky and Pauly 2009, 18). Admirable as that is, is it of any importance for reading Conrad's text? Does one have to read them against this biographical background? On the other hand, especially if one is interested in the inherent foreignness of all languages, can one ignore it? It is no mere biographical question, it touches the attempt to read Conrad's texts, as one of them outlines: the short story "Amy Foster."[8]

Conrad, Mother Tongue, Foster Language

"Amy Foster" depicts a dramatic encounter of different languages, and—principally—of different conceptions of what a mother tongue is. The story, written in 1901, is told by an unnamed "I," a traveller, who recounts events told to him by his friend Kennedy (Conrad 2002, 149). At one point, the anonymous reports his words as following:

> Conceive you the kind of an existence over-shadowed, oppressed, by the everyday material appearances, as if by the visions of a nightmare. (Conrad 2002, 166)

The syntax of this sentence is extraordinary. In the "Explanatory Notes" to the *Oxford World's Classics* edition of the story, editor Cedric Watts clarifies the wording "Conceive you" as

> one of Conrad's occasional Gallicisms; this example appears in 'Heart of Darkness', too. (Instead of the English 'Can you imagine…?', he gives a literal translation of the French "Concevez-vous".) (Conrad 2002, 228)

In "Amy Foster," however, it is not at all clear that the annotated sentence is a question. It is closed not by a question mark but by a period, which makes the sentence waver between, or fuse, a question and an imperative. Moreover, Watt's comment raises the question: Whose Gallicism is it?[9] It is certainly Conrad's insofar as Conrad has written the sentence. Yet that says nothing about how—and as whose—those English words formed according to French grammar are supposed to be read. Reading them against the backdrop of the biographical information that Conrad's first language was Polish and French his second, acquired in very early

years, one will be either unable to rule out the possibility that he made a mistake. Or one will reach no further than the annotation, no further than noting that Conrad occasionally uses Gallicism. But in order to say what? A biographical approach would avoid reading the strange wording within the context of the story that undermines any clear-cut distinctions.

The unidentified narrator paid his friend Kennedy a visit "[a] good many years ago now, on my return from abroad" (Conrad 2002, 150). By the time Kennedy told the story, he has settled down as a "country doctor" in Colebrook, Kent. Before that, he "had begun life as surgeon in the Navy, and afterwards had been the companion of a famous traveller, in the days when there were continents with unexplored interiors." (149) What Kennedy tells and the anonymous retells is how a castaway from an unnamed spot in "the eastern range of the Carpathians" in Austria is washed ashore in the small town after suffering shipwreck with a Hamburg emigrant-ship bound for America. (161) Yet this itinerary told at the outset of "Amy Foster" is the traveller Kennedy's subsequent elucidation of events that took place when none of the involved had any orientation about where and whence. Kennedy's story tells of how people meet who have never travelled (before). The castaway appears "outlandish" (165, 167) to the English peasants, first of all because, in their ears, he is "jabbering… senseless speech" (160) most of them do not perceive as a language at all. The story recalls their point of view of being confronted with "a 'horrid-looking' man" (158), "a hairy sort of gipsy," or with someone "very drunk," "babbling aloud in a voice that was enough to make one die of fright" (159), or with "an escaped lunatic" (160). On the part of the Kent locals, any sense of empathy or compassion is averted by the conclusion that an incomprehensible utterance is no human speech and the one uttering it, therefore, to be neither spoken to, nor treated humanely. The doctor himself first considered that the castaway outcast might speak Basque, French, German, or Italian. But none of these languages was understood by him, whose tongue was "unlike anything one had ever heard." (164)

Not least in the paragraph comprising the words "Conceive you," however, the report of Kennedy's story also tells of how the faces of the English men and women seem "as mute as the faces of the dead" (166) to the castaway, and their language an "incomprehensible tongue." (163) The castaway later tells Kennedy that when he first met the English, "he put his trust in God, believing he was no longer in this world." (154) The eyes of the stranger make the mother country of a colonial Empire appear as an "unexplored interior" no different from those Kennedy used to explore. "[F]or him, who knew nothing of the earth," the doctor explains, "England was an undiscovered country." Kent is one of the so-called Home Counties

encircling London; in Kennedy's story of the castaway's fate, however, the rural rim of the heart of the Empire differs little from that of darkness at the Congo.

The pivot of both the peasants' seeming lack of the concept of foreignness and of the castaway's inversed colonialist view of Kent is the distinction between an "own" and a foreign language—not insofar as it is congruent with the difference between English and the castaway's unknown tongue, but insofar as English is both. For the castaway makes the English language appear unfamiliar to the English. Kennedy is quoted saying:

> He told me this story of his adventure…, at first in a sort of anxious baby-talk, then, as he acquired the language, with great fluency, but always with that singing, soft, and at the same time vibrating intonation that instilled a strangely penetrating power into the sound of the most familiar English words, as if they had been the words of an unearthly language. (Conrad 2002, 158)

As the foreigner acquires English, the language is estranged from the native speakers. His "outlandish" pronunciation expounds the other tongue within the English mother tongue. "At times in Conrad the language barrier is solid and visible," writes Michael Greaney (2002), listing "Amy Forster" as the first of these instances. The story, he says, portrays "non-communication between speakers of different languages" (19). While "non-communication" goes too far, it is true that the story evolves around the separating forces of the apparently impermeable "language barrier." Yet what hinders exchange in "Amy Foster" is that this barrier is not at all "solid." As the castaway acquires the English language, he imports his foreign tongue into it, thus shifting the barrier: First it runs between articulate speech on the one hand and incomprehensible "jabbering" on the other, by the end of the story between a standard and an "outlandish" pronunciation of English.[10]

Furthermore, and unlike Greaney says, "the language barrier" is not at all "visible" in Conrad's story, but aural. The sound of the voice is abundantly emphasised with every of the multiple narrators in "Amy Foster": Kennedy "had the talent of making people talk to him freely, and an inexhaustible patience in listening to their tales." (Conrad 2002, 150) Listening to Kennedy, his anonymous visitor marks both "the silence in the fields" surrounding them (153) and the direction of "Kennedy's voice, speaking behind me," Kennedy notes about the castaway that "his broken English…resembled curiously the speech of a young child" (154). And even after having acquired English, the castaway still offers his prayers "in a slow, fervent tone" in his foreign tongue, and sings his songs in "dismal

tunes" (168), as it appears to the ears of his surroundings. When the castaway recounts the shipwreck, he reproduces the sounds of the disaster: "[A] great noise of wind went outside and heavy blows fell—boom! boom!" (155) This almost utterly oral world[11] is centred around the "spell," the magic fixation binding the girl whose name heads the story as much to the castaway as the country doctor to their mysterious relationship: "[W]hen it came it worked like powerful spell" (152, cf. 154) That spell allows for no such distance as the deciphering of words written down, and spelled out, requires. The importance of the aural perception for the confrontation is underlined when the "intonation" of the castaway resonates in Kennedy's words as an alliterating "Penetrating Power," "Singing, Soft, and at the Same time vibrating." In order to testify to the "broken English" that rings in the ears of the peasants and the doctor, Conrad breaks the tune and structure of the English language. This is the context of the odd wording "Conceive you."

Whatever may have been Conrad's accent and issues with the English tongue, the words "Conceive you" present the scene quite appropriately. The words present how the language of the two narrators is affected by what they tell: How Kennedy's English becomes unfamiliar to him due to the events he witnessed, and how the language of the anonymous retelling his story is affected by it. It is impossible to decide between these alternatives, just as it is impossible to decide whether the sentence opened by the words "Conceive you" is a question or an imperative. And this undecideability is the point. The sentence seeks to imagine the castaway's life in the English village: It is sure to be like a nightmare not to understand anything, neither the language nor the habits, so that even the usually minute, unnoticed details of everyday life are mysteries. "It is indeed hard upon a man," the country doctor says, "to find himself a lost stranger, helpless, incomprehensible, and of a mysterious origin, in some obscure corner of the earth." (155) This might be as true for him as for the castaway, both washed ashore in Kent. On his voyage that ended in shipwreck, the castaway, Kennedy speculates, was "taken out of his knowledge." (162) Hence he "had not the power to judge," not even in the choice of his wife in Kent (170). Yet in relating that, the two narrators struggle with the same problem as the castaway: They, too, are taken out of their knowledge. They encounter a man whose tongue is as incomprehensible to them as his fate. How could anyone speak comprehensibly of what Kennedy calls "the Incomprehensible" (151)? How could one judge it, and say "imagine," or ask to imagine, if it is precisely to articulate the utter impossibility to imagine the other's point of view? Speaking of sheer foreignness in one's native language seems amiss—unless the foreignness of this very language

is tongued, the otherness of even the mother tongue. The link of the English "conceive" to the French *concevoir* is an instance of the inherent foreignness of English, and even more so is the fact that it *is* possible to form English words according to French grammar. It is impossible to judge what kind of sentence springs from that, a question or an imperative, but this undecideability mirrors the narrators' inability to judge what they are speaking of. The castaway's fate remains an imperative question, a source of insecurity that cannot be dispelled.

The profound hermeneutic irritation in "Amy Foster" is mirrored in details: The very "penetrating power" Kennedy ascribes to the outcast's unique English is attributed to Kennedy's mind by the anonymous narrator at the outset of the story (149). The castaway's main characteristic, "outlandish," is conferred upon a parrot earlier in the story: The "outlandish bird" dies because Amy Foster does not help it (152), and the castaway appears to take its place. Confronted not only with "the Incomprehensible," but, as Kennedy actually says, with "the fear of the Incomprehensible that hangs over all our heads" (151), the narration (whoever tells it) attempts to restore comprehension by seizing unknown phenomena by means of familiar descriptions. This strategy, however, on the contrary defamiliarizes language as it makes the meaning of its words appear just as elusive as what they intent to grasp.

It is never clarified in the story if English is the narrators' native language. This uncertainty, too, reflects the estrangement from English that the castaway's foreign "intonation" pronounces the better the more he acquires the language. Unlike his English, French is, of course, no "unearthly language." The narrators' attempt to articulate foreignness inevitably remains within the realm of what they know. This inevitable point of view—or, rather, "point of speech"—essentially contributes to the fatal end of the castaway's encounter with the English peasants. For the mystery Kennedy initially says he wonders about is neither the stranger's arrival nor how he is perceived and received. Kennedy wonders about Amy Foster: Why she alone amiably fosters the castaway (as seems predicted by her name), feeds him, talks to him, falls in love with him, marries him, bears him a son—and suddenly leaves him to die, never mentioning him again. "Not a word of him. Never." (175)

Kennedy and the anonymous narrator visit Amy Foster on the doctor's round. The characteristics of her voice conclude the description of her appearance: "With a distinct catch in her breath, her voice sounded low and timid." The anonymous (a distinct voice in this passage) further concludes: "She seems a dull creature" (150). Amy Foster indeed appears to be either slow of understanding, or hard of hearing, or both ("dull, *adj.* 1-

2" OED). She seems to be too insensitive, too dull, to be offended by the castaway's "outlandish" sounds. Kennedy, on the other hand, says: "The only peculiarity I perceived in her was…a sort of preliminary stammer which passes away with the first word." (Conrad 2002, 151) Yet words from her mouth are rare, as he later recalls: "She said nothing at all to anybody, and went on her way [following the castaway] as if she had been deaf." (170) Speech is generally foreign to Amy Foster. Unlike all other Kent locals, she does not appear to be estranged from her mother tongue when hearing the castaway's "unearthly" English—until suddenly she seems to listen. She grows afraid of the man she fostered, and leaves him to die when he is about to make their son a native speaker of his foreign language. He had told Kennedy:

> His wife had snatched the child out of his arms one day as he sat on the doorstep crooning to it a song such as the mothers sing to babies in his mountains.…Why? He expected the boy to repeat the prayer aloud after him by-and-by, as he used to do after his old father when he was a child—in his own country. And I discovered he longed for their boy to grow up so that he could have a man to talk with in that language that to our ears sounded so disturbing, so passionate, and so bizarre. (Conrad 2002, 172)

As soon as the question arises which language the child should acquire first—that is, as soon as the stranger questions what seems to be unquestionable to Amy Foster—, she grows afraid of him. When the child's father tries to replace her in order to teach the child its first language, she is terrified of his foreignness as he is bound to pass it on to his son. The critical turning point that raises Amy Foster's fear is the moulding of the child's articulation, its adaption to the castaway's foreign tongue, so that his son, too, would speak with an "unearthly" intonation in what is, according to the language Amy Foster speaks, his mother and native tongue. Both parents hold on to their particular comprehension of what a first language is. To Amy Foster, it is the mother tongue, the mother's tongue. To her husband, it is the father's. This, at least, can be inferred from his name: The peasants come to call him "Yanko Goorall," yet the latter is not his actual surname but means "mountaineer…in the dialect of his country" (169). The name is the only indication that the castaway speaks Polish, as *góral* does mean "mountaineer" in Polish (not the profession but someone who lives in the mountains). Studies hence often just call the castaway a Pole and suggest that he offends the English by talking "in his mother tongue," as for example Morf and Obendiek say.[12] Yet that misses the point in two ways: Firstly, it is of paramount importance for the scene of foreignness portrayed in "Amy Foster" that the castaway's native language is unidentified. He cannot tell, and neither can the Kent locals; in fact nei-

ther of them seems to be familiar with the concept of foreign languages. Secondly, and notwithstanding the first point, the first language is literally called "father tongue" in Polish: *jezyk ojczysty*. The origin of the castaway is not to be determined; still, juxtaposing his notion that his son should speak "as he used to do after his old father…in his own country" with the Polish term underlines that the catastrophe is brought about by the father trying to teach the child a father tongue and the mother a mother tongue—both equally claiming to be the child's first and native language. Among the English the attempt to establish a "father tongue" cannot succeed. In fact, this attempt breaks the spell that bound Amy Foster to Yanko Gooral, who remains an outcast amongst the peasants since the pronunciation even of his fluent English estranges the English native speakers from their language. It is the very concept of one exclusive first language that appears to be fatal in Conrad's text.

One day, Kennedy recounts, he came to see Yanko Gooral when "[h]e was very feverish, and kept on muttering to himself." It is ultimately not the fever but the muttering that causes his death. Upon the rejected request to take her husband upstairs to bed, Amy Foster insists: "'I couldn't. I couldn't. He keeps on saying something—I don't know what.'" Urged by the doctor, she tells him that her husband wants her to hand him the child, and she insists: "'…I can't understand what he says to it.'…'Oh, I hope he won't talk!'" (173) Yet he does. Amy Foster later tells the doctor that as the fever grew worse and Yanko Gooral kept asking for water, she could not move.

> I believe he spoke to her for a long time, entreating, wondering, pleading, ordering, I suppose. She says she bore it as long as she could. And then a gust of rage came over him.
>
> He sat up and called out terribly one word—some word.…She heard him call twice after her down the road in a terrible voice—and fled. (Conrad 2002, 174)

The doctor finds his patient outside the house, "lying face down and his body in a puddle" (174): silenced, provided with water, and dying. What raised the peasant's and eventually even Amy Foster's emotions is that instead of crossing the so-called language barrier in acquiring English, the foreigner's language acquisition blurs the distinction between native and foreign language. His "unearthly" pronunciation voices the otherness inherent to English: The decisive, fatal, frightening "one word" is thus just "some word" of any language in Amy Foster's ears. And while both the castaway's linguistic characteristics and his incomprehension of Kent habits put him in the position of "an animal under a net" (154), "of a wild

creature under the net" (175), fear does the same to Amy Foster: She awaked from "that enchantment," that spell under which the castaway had put her, "by a fear resembling the unaccountable terror of a brute" (153). Blurring borders proliferates, which in turn raises fear, just as Kafka says. When the castaway dies, his words, Kennedy recalls,

> were no longer in his own language.…"Why?" he cried in the penetrating and indignant voice of a man calling to a responsible Maker. A gust of wind and a swish of rain answered.
>
> And as I turned away to shut the door he pronounced the word "Merciful!" and expired. (Conrad 2002, 174-175)

Yet what is the castaway's "own language"? Kennedy might refer to his foreign native language, since Yanko Gooral speaks English. But insofar as he has acquired English, this language is "his own," too. Even though he speaks English, however, Yanko Gooral does not speak in his *own* language but, rather, questions if anyone ever owns a language: For, firstly, in which language is the question put if is "answered" by the wind and the rain? And, secondly, is a quotation, even in one's mother tongue, truly spoken in one's "own language"? And if so, does that apply only for intentional quotations, or for coincidences, too? For according to St. Mark, "Why?" was also the question of Jesus dying at the cross when he addressed his "Maker" in Aramaic.[13]

> And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Mk 15:34 [AV])

In "Amy Foster," the dying foreigner needs no interpreter. He speaks what one cannot but call the text's *own foreign tongue*. English appears to be the castaway's "foster tongue": nourishing him temporarily like Amy Foster does, granting him the possibility to communicate, lending him last words, yet eventually leaving him and his comprehension. This, however, is not due to the fact that English is a foreign language for the castaway. Rather, Conrad's "Amy Foster" makes every language appear as a "foster tongue."[14] Every language, no matter at which point it is acquired, grants the possibility to ask, to tell of a "mystery" (Conrad 2002, 150), yet none grants full comprehension. Yanko Gooral's mother tongue did not grant him any comprehension of the English, yet neither did the English language—which neither enabled Kennedy to fully comprehend the events. The doctor voices his incomprehension with the help of French. Yanko Gooral's last question remains unanswered as neither Kennedy nor the anonymous retelling his story understands what has happened, or why.

The castaway's puzzling fate leaves the disquieting impression that inasmuch as a mother tongue remains an "other" tongue, it is not one's own as the organ of pronunciation is, but a "foster language" lent to, and left in the care of, the tongue.

Merely ascribing the words "Conceive you" to Conrad, who occasionally uses Gallicisms, avoids reading that these words speak of the elusive familiarity of every language—in fear, it seems, "of the Incomprehensible that hangs over all our heads—over all our heads.…," as Kennedy emphasises (151).

Jakobson notes a structure in the shaping of a child's articulation that corresponds to the exclusiveness claimed by the first language in Conrad's story: Actual language acquisition is preceded by a phase of babbling, Jakobson says, in which an infant produces all kinds of sounds, many of which are not part of the phonetic inventory of the language(s) spoken to the infant. Yet "the child then loses nearly all of [its] ability to produce sounds in passing over from the pre-language stage to the first acquisition of words, *i.e.*, to the first genuine stage of language." (1968, 21/cf. 1982, 20-21) The loss even includes the sounds of the language(s) in which others communicate with the child. This phonetic tabula rasa, Daniel Heller-Roazen (2005, 11) notes, is "a turning point" that introduces the acquisition of a mother tongue—as if it "were possible only through an act of oblivion, a kind of linguistic infantile amnesia…[I]s it the mother tongue that, taking hold of its new speaker, refuses to tolerate him even the shadow of another?" Phonetic exclusiveness, however, marks Jakobson's discours no less than Conrad's story: Jacobson carefully emphasises that the "pre-language" infantile babbling does not affect the "genuine stage of language," the phonetic and semantic stability of the linguist's speech. "Amy Foster" employs the imagery of colonialism and animality to expound the profound hermeneutic problem that comprehending language starts at comprehending something *as* language, which requires drawing a dividing line to exclude what shall not be listened to.

The Book in Detail

In order to comprehensively elucidate the questions solved and those raised by distinguishing a mother tongue from other tongues, the present work is a collection that discusses various literary works rather than a monograph on just one text. For no single text comprises all aspects of the problematic yet seemingly inevitable distinction. *(M)Other Tongues*, furthermore, abstains from attempting and claiming to tread its topic with one coherent theory and vocabulary. Rather, the book seeks to outline the pe-

culiar structure of the distinction between languages, the precise uncertainty, which can only be missed, and indeed obscured, by the approach to an all-embracing theory. The subsequent chapters, therefore, analyse different dimensions of the distinction in English, French, and German texts from the 16th to the 21st century. The discussed texts in turn refer to a multitude of other languages such as Spanish, Arab, and the tongues once known as Yugoslavian.

Part **I: Telling Tongues—Apart** focuses on the distinction between languages represented in literary texts: Why it is drawn, and which role literature plays in this process that is usually regarded a political and social one. The first study outlines the English-French community and rivalry in the North America of the 18th century, and the European view of the New World, as shaped by the texts of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur who located himself on all of these sides. The second chapter traces the contrasts between English and French as well as between European and American literature further to the early 20th century, to the works of William Carlos Williams, which mark them sharply. Reading Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*, the third text widens the scope beyond the West: to the acquisition of English, the corresponding loss of non-Western mother tongues, and multilingual cosmopolitanism as an essentially Western concept.

Part **II: Mother, Tongue, and Other Images of Language** examines the vocabulary and imagery used to set languages apart. The first study outlines the employment of corporeal images for linguistic structures in general as a metaphorical process that standardizes both realms. Conjoined twins in particular are read as an image for inseparable non-unity that undermines the conventional concept of identity, as texts by the Bosnian-American author Alexandar Hemon demonstrate. The second study tracks the sexual and medical language in the works of Edmund Spenser, the poet admired by William Shakespeare. The logic of the metaphors of 16th century English poetry analysed in this chapter has been prevalent in all of Western literature for centuries: It presents gendered language as matrix of poetic generation impregnated by male poets. The third study shows how theoretical language becomes poetic in tracing the distinction between languages: Derrida, author of *Monolingualism of the Other*, harps on the French homophone [la mɛr], "the mother" (*mère*) and "the sea" (*mer*)—the sea he had to cross to become a French philosopher who questions both philosophy and "the" French tongue.

Derrida captures the difficulties of the distinction between a mother tongue and other tongues in a sentence that takes Aristotle's well-known definition of the human as "the animal that has *logos*" (1959, 10-11:1253a)

personally: “Je n’ai qu’une langue, ce n’est pas la mienne”—“I only have one language; it is not mine” (1996, 1/1998, 1). This seeming contradiction draws an exact distinction between *having* a language—as being the case—, and that language being one’s *own* (possession)—as not the case, and indeed impossible. While, of course, not answering the notorious question what *having* a language means, Derrida’s contradictory phrase points out a defect in the common analogy drawn between “language” and the organ of the “tongue”: The latter alone is indubitably one’s own.[15]

At this point of the book, it will have become clear that autobiographical approaches to defining an “own” language form the background of many discussions of the distinction between languages—and that they are mostly tantamount to undermining the notion of a single and uniform (native) language. Hence part **III: Self-Portrayals** discusses texts that present the issue in a more complex manner. The first study traces the formation of a bilingual oeuvre and self-image in the novels and essays by Nancy Huston, who takes the works of Beckett as a model and draws on musical structures to denote translingual ones. Rather than being divided into different languages, the self is composed in the process of self-translation. The second study reads Celan’s explicit refusal of all kinds of bi- or “translingual” writing against the backdrop of his monumental work as a translator, his early texts in Romanian, unfinished French works, and traces of Russian and Hebrew in all of his oeuvre.

Part **IV: Undoing Distinctions** pursues the simultaneousness of multiple languages in one text that part III touches upon. Reading texts that tongue several languages, this part of the book explores what happens if the questionable distinction between languages is imagined to be ignored. The first study follows the Spanish in Molly Blooms otherwise well-studied monologue at the end of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Yet it is impossible to speak Spanish without articulating its Arab and Jewish history, too. The study shows that far from becoming merely idiosyncratic recollections of Gibraltar, Molly’s speech presents Spain as an emblem of hybridity and, paradoxically, a symbol of the Irish nation with its complex relation to the English language. Kafka, to whom the second study of this part is devoted, insisted on being a native speaker not of German but of Yiddish. Kafka’s texts, written in perfect standard High German and devoid of both regionalisms and foreign words, undermine the standard by metaphoric plays on Yiddishisms, racial slurs, and Hebrew tales that estrange the German language from itself.

Whereas the previous part highlights texts in which the distinction between languages is ignored, **V: Fading Language** takes the logical step further to read texts that question the distinction even between language

and "non-language." The first study discusses infantile language in texts by Pastior, outlining that the limit between what is and what is not yet human language might be necessary, but is untenable. The last study of the book pursues the question thus raised: Where, or what, is the dividing line between human and (other) animal language? Texts by Kafka and Peter Weiss suppose that these questions cannot be answered conclusively as human language is invaded by the sounds of animals—which is possible because language is not a secluded, semantically fixed system, but open to all kinds of sounds, and to the invention of meaning. And it is exactly for this reason that all of the distinctions discussed in the book are volatile, valid only for particular cases, namely, single texts: They are uncertain, and yet precise.

Notes

[1] The OED lists the first record of *tundish* 1388-9 ("tun-dish | tundish, *n.*"), while *funnel*—via "Old French *'founil'," both "probably corrupted adoptions of Latin 'infundibulum'"—is first recorded in 1402-3 ("funnel, *n.*[1]").

[2] "Itaque, adepti quod querebamus, dicimus illustre, cardinale, aulicum et curiale vulgare in Latino, quod omnis latie civitatis est et nullius esse videtur, et quo municipalia vulgaria omnia Latinorum mensurantur et ponderantur et comparantur." (So we have found what we were seeking: we can define the illustrious, cardinal, aulic, and curial vernacular in Italy as that which belongs to every Italian city yet seems to belong to none, and against which the vernaculars of all the cities of the Italians can be measured, weighted, and compared.)

[3] My translation; cf. Kafka (1989, 265). "Glücklicherweise ist aber jeder der deutschen Sprache Kundige auch fähig Jargon zu verstehen." (1993, 192)

[4] My translation; cf. Kafka (1989, 266). "…daß Sie sich fürchten werden, aber nicht mehr vor dem Jargon, sondern vor sich." (1993, 193)

[5] "Das Kind schafft, indem es entlehnt." (Jakobson 1982, 8)

[6] The notion of *precise uncertainty* originates in that of "präzise Ungenauigkeit," developed in conversation with Holger Steinmann. He, however, elaborates it differently in his text on Pastior, namely, as "precise imprecision" (see 185).

[7] The short note in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" is, of course, not everything Woolf has to say about Conrad's texts. "Mr. Conrad: A Conversation" (Woolf 1981, 74-78) discusses his English further—without, however, leading to a conclusion that could be cited as "Woolf's." The dialogue voices contradictory opinions: on the one hand the notion that Conrad keeps telling the same story "over and over" again in his works; "perhaps it is because he is a foreigner." (75) Conrad, the same character criticizes, "is too formal, too courteous, too scrupulous in the use of a language which is not his own." (78) On the other hand, Woolf's dialogue concludes with the opposing view that the criticized foreignness and formality are symptoms not of Conrad's foreign mother tongue, but of an aristocratic attitude, native throughout Europe, yet unfamiliar to most (77-78).