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Translingual Writers: Introductory Notes

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Fellow scholars, I'm delighted and honored to speak with you. I'm especially pleased, that scholars in multilingual Russia are conducting research into literary translingualism. Please, accept my regrets that I cannot be with you today in Moscow and I apologize for speaking English. Many years ago, during the semester that I spent teaching down at the Tbilisi State University I could manage a conversation in Russian, though in Georgian accent, but I'm afraid that my command of the language has deteriorated and it is now "ochen' plokho".

I want to offer a few brief comments about literary translingualism, which I define as a phenomenon of writers who write in more than one language when the language is other than their primary one. Probably, the most famous translingual authors of the 20th century are Joseph Conrad, Samuel Beckett, and Vladimir Nabokov. But there are many-many others. Conrad, born Józef Korzeniowski in what is now Ukraine, became one of the greatest modern English novelists. Then he came to English, after Polish and French, as his third language. Born in Ireland, Beckett wrote compellingly in his native English, but he made even more of mark in an adopted language, French. Nabokov was trilingual and wrote in various times in Russian, French, and English. Many other authors of North switched into or out of Russia. Among them: Nikolay Gogol, Isaak Babel, Else Thioley, Andreï Makine, Joseph Brodsky, Fazil Iskander, Chinghiz Aitmatov, and Gary Shteyngart. I hope that you will teach me about many others.

We can all appreciate how very difficult it is to write well in our first language. Writing a book, according to George Orwell, is a horrible, exhausting struggle like a long bout of some painful illness. So, why would anyone take an additional handicap of seeking expression in an adopted language? Nabokov claimed that switching languages was quite exceedingly painful, like learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion. According to the philosopher George Santayana, who wrote in English, though his native language was Spanish, "It is impossible to write poetry, except in the language one's mother sang lullabies". The examples are Patriarch, Rainer Maria Rilke, Fernando Pessoa, Kamila Dus, and many others referred Santayana.

War, disease, famine, tyranny, terrorism, natural disaster, and economic hardship have contributed to an unprecedented movement of human beings in recent decades. Migrants now constitute 3,4 percent of the world's population. Many of them adopt the language of their new host nation. Not all migrants are writers and not all translinguals are migrants. But unprecedented mobility is surely a factor in burgeoning of translingual literature.

But so are canons, when the chances of writing a bestseller are much greater in English and Chinese, each of which has more than one billion speakers, than Maltese, which has barely half a million speakers.

Latin, Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, and English have been the languages of powerful empires, whose subjects were encouraged to adopt the dominant language, even if it was not their maternal tongue. The canon of Latin literature, for example, was a non-small measure of the creation of men who adopted the language of Rome, even though there were like “Seneca” Quintilian, Martial, and Lukan from Spain. Let’s just say that when translingual writing is currently flourishing it possesses an ancient pedigree. Translingual writing may well be developed as a practical matter, shortly after the invention of writing itself. It is quite possible that Etruscans and Italians, Carthaginians and other people of the Mediterranean basin and Asia Minor appropriated a newly devised alphabet brought by the sea Phoenicians, not only by adapting it to their own unlettered tongues, but also by writing in Phoenician, probably, not an epic poetry, but at least invoices for their commercial transactions with the Phoenicians. Even earlier, as far back as the 23rd century BCE, the 1st poet history knows by name, Enheduanna, the only daughter of the powerful Akkadian, king Sargon, composed her poetry in Sumerian, though her 1st language was probably Akkadian.

A few distinctions are necessary. To the extent that we all are constantly negotiating different registers of language: formal, intimate, professional, colloquial, regional, slang, etc., we are all multilingual. But an ISO lingual writer is one who like John Keats or Fyodor Dostoevsky writes exclusively in L1, the native language. However, an ISO lingual translingual, if that is not an oxymoron is a writer who switched languages but writes only in an adopted language. Examples include Joseph Conrad who wrote only in English, Ilyas Kennedy who wrote only in German (not his native Ladino), Chinua Achebe wrote only in English not his native Igbo, and Asia Jabar who wrote only in French not her native Burbo. By contrast what could be called ambilingual translingual is an author who writes in more than one language. Examples include Patriarch, who wrote poetry in both Latin and Italian, André Brink who wrote both in Afrikaans and English, Muhammed kbal, an important figure in both Urdu and Persian literatures, and Mendele Mocher Sforim, a pioneer in both modern Yiddish and modern Hebrew prose.

Why is the study of translingualism so important? The Indian novelist Radja Rao dismissed out of hand, the important thing he contented in English not his native Kannada, is not what language wants write in, for language is really an accidental thing. What matters is the authenticity of experience and this can generally be achieved in any language. However, according to philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (quote): “The limits of my language are the limits of my mind”. Most other translinguals disagree with row. They are implicitly or even explicitly warfians, linguistic determinants for whom each language entails a unique Weltanschauung. An Anglophone writer cannot easily express states of mind signified by the Russian words “poshlost” and “toska”, which have no exact equivalence in English. Conversely, the Russian language, which has no articles does not naturally distinguish between the statements “I read the book” and “I read a book”. Each language provides a different template, through which we apprehend such conceptual categories as time, space, quantity, colour, and gender. Quote “We dissect nature along

lines laid down by our native languages”, declared Benjamin Whorf. Switching languages means altering the contours of the literary universe.

Though immigration, colonialism and commerce might be the most common motives for writing in an adopted language. Literary translanguaging, as an assertion of free will, just for the hell of it, might provide the most interesting cases. They would include Oscar Wilde, the Irish author who composed his play “Salome” in French rather than his native English. In order to shock and taunt the English Ireland are historically oppressors. Another Irishman Samuel Beckett switched from English to French, merely because he wanted to. After considerable success writing fiction in English, Jhumpa Lahiri the Bengali-American writer fell in love with and began writing in Italian which she describes as quote “A language that has nothing to do with my life”. It takes a particular willfulness to write poetry or fiction as some have done in Esperanto, the artificial language invented in late 19th century that is a native language of virtually no one.

Choosing to write in an adopted language constitutes an act of self-invention, often signified by a new name. Karen Blixen became Isak Dinesen when she wrote in English rather than her native Danish. Ngũgĩwa Thiong’o became James Ngugi when writing in English rather than Gikuyu. And Shmuel Yosef Halevi Chachkes, a native speaker of Yiddish, became S.I. Agnon in Hebrew. It is precisely because he resists changing identities despite living in the United States for most of his life. Czesław Miłosz continued writing in Polish. Quote “In my rejection of imposing a profound change of myself by going over to writing in a different language I perceive a fear of losing my identity”, he declared.

Multilingual awareness endows translanguaging writers with a double consciousness. Translanguaging also facilitates the defamiliarization, that Viktor Shklovsky contented was the essential quality of aesthetic perception. It is too easy to ramble on in one’s primary language without conscious attention to particular words, but in an adopted language impedes fluency and enforces concentration. Puerto Rican novelist Rosario Ferré wrote her books sometimes in her native Spanish and sometimes in English. She explained (quote): “English makes me slow down. I have to think over what I’m going to say twice, maybe three times, which is often healthy, because I can’t put my foot or rather my pen in my mouth so easily”. Every translanguaging writer is translanguaging in *his or her own way* and on other occasion I would love to talk about such cases as you go Hamilton, whose Irish nationalist father punished him for speaking English rather than Irish, but who writes his books in the forbidden tongue. Andrei Makine, the Russian born author whose novels are keen to his adopted French. Yōko Tawada, who wrote writes in both Japanese and German. Gideon Levy, the 1st American to publish a novel in Japanese, and Felix Paul Greve who began his career in Germany, and German faked his own suicide and resurfacing Canada writing in English under the name Frederick Philip Grove. Walter Benjamin observed that (quote): “All translations aspired to a pure language”. I would argue that translanguaging aspires to panlingualism, the impossible simultaneity of all languages. The translanguaging project rejects confinement to the *Weltanschauung* of a single language. The urge to accumulate languages culminates in a “*reductio ad infinitum*”. The dream of transcending all languages is to arrive at the space of universal truth. Every language is, according to Fredric Jameson’s metaphor borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche, “a prison house”, but the native language is probably the most constraining facility. It is too easy just to stay within its walls. Acquiring another language

provides the ladder by which to scale those walls, although it means landing in another prison. The transfer at least brought from one's perspective liberates what to think about penal institutions. Translingualism, writing in a required language and codeswitching, mixing languages within a single text are literary weapons in the struggle against monolithic thinking. Just as white is not an absence of colour but a blend of all colours, silence toward which Backett's translingual fiction aspires is the realization of all language.

I hold on the brink of silence, wishing you much success in your research on translingualism, because no scholar can possibly master more than a handful of languages, the study of translingualism is by necessity a collective enterprise. I applaud the work of this Conference and support mutual enlightenment and I look forward to the opportunity to speak with many of you in person soon. До свидания!

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