

BABBLE, BABEL, BABEL

Some years ago, I held a series of workshops in diverse international and interdisciplinary settings, experimenting with linguistic multiplicity.¹ For this purpose, an excerpt from my autofictional prose narrative with the title *Mütter Land*² was translated into the participants' mother tongues by an online

translator. Since the original piece was written in dense literary German, the digital translating process rendered highly unpredictable interlingual outcomes.

A nonsense coinage recurring in these translations allows me to performatively *show*³ the non-monolingual meaning-making process. The word at the origin of the neologism in question – ‘heimkomme’ – means ‘I come home’. Out of this German first-person singular, the Internet translator created in several target languages the peculiar word ‘(I/i)mkomme’.⁴

Since the word was generated in a split second, the academic term *Ad-hoc-Bildung* popped up in my head. This term soon appeared to me as a twofold *sign* for L2 acquisition.⁵ Firstly, it combines Latin – which, for each one of us, represents a foreign language – in order to form a compound belonging to German linguistic jargon. Secondly, its English equivalent, ‘nonce word’, evokes *on the spot* an association with the word ‘nonsense’. The latter, in its turn, establishes a parallel to the semantic cacophony resulting from the digital translation process. Absurdly enough, this kind of sensitivity for the materiality of language from a multilingual vantage point links non-monolingual writing with the postmodern experimental literary tradition.⁶

The specific nonce word started to disclose itself to me in a multilingual deciphering process. According to my general observations, the online translator proposes an English word in the case of a more complicated expression, for which it lacks an equivalent in the target language. In the beginning of ‘Imkomme’ I now identified the English verb phrase ‘I’m’, which – ‘by the law of the strongest’ – had intruded the smaller language translations. This was a coincidence of semantic pertinence, given that the autofictional excerpt displays the interior monologue of a naturally bilingual protagonist. In the automatic translation process the German prefix ‘heim-’ (home) had been substituted by the English self-declaration ‘I’m’. Interpreted in terms of the symbolic order, coming home suddenly equaled to finding oneself through (a new) language. This reminded me that the realm of language(s) is the place that migration authors themselves often view as their ‘home’ (cf., e.g., Dinev 2004). As by a fortunate coincidence (brought into being in a translingual third space), the excerpt’s first-person narrator of Ukrainian origin practices German spelling while climbing a fence separating her from her new friends in a still foreign living environment.

Speaking of spelling: on the phonetic level it occurred to me that the German ‘h’ is silent in the Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish). Coupled with the fact that in German ‘ei’ is pronounced /ai/, the English /aim/ coincided with the pronunciation of ‘heim-’, when viewed from the *perspective* of phonetic ‘code switching’ within a single word. A late cue for a multilingual subject that makes eve(n/r) more sense with each new language?

Illustrating the confusing complexity of the multilingual and multicultural identity formation process, the deciphering of the non(sen)/s/ word required time and patience until creative answers emerged out of my pool of internalized polysemous knowledge. The computer-aided translations – which, due to the language-specific multilayered meanings in the original excerpt, would have stimulated most professional translators' creative ambition – were uniquely *challenging* to comprehend.

Such dynamic polysystems with constant interpenetrations, osmoses, symbioses and hybridizations (Wandruszka 1979: 314–315) restage Derrida's concept of *différance*. In such an ongoing semiosis one is, time and time again, cast back to the beginning, which – given the accumulating associations – manifests itself from a slightly different perspective. Very much like the paradoxical childhood memories of the bilingual protagonist in her monologue.