

WORKSHOP 5

'HOW DO YOU SAY THAT?': LEARNING LANGUAGES IN LITERATURE

In other sessions, we have talked about the different kinds of language which we ourselves use, as well as the ways in which writers have used the creative potential of the languages they have at their disposal. But to develop this kind of variety, people need to *learn* new languages. And this, too, can be a vital dimension of literature.

What languages do we, here in this room, speak? Let's just take a quick poll to start with. These could be languages you speak a lot, or a little; languages you speak at home, or that you've learned at school, or even bits and pieces of a language you've learned from friends. Are these languages which you can speak, understand, read, or write? Going around the group, what kind of a range of languages do we have at our disposal – and are there any surprises?

Inevitably, what we'll find in our discussions with one another is a wide variety of languages, and a wide variety of knowledge of them (what linguists call 'competences'); and also a wide variety of experiences of language learning, and feelings about those experiences.

Let's all just spend a couple of minutes jotting down some thoughts, or a brief anecdote, about your own experiences. What does it feel like to have to, or to try to, learn a new language? You might have experiences of finding it frustrating, or satisfying, or funny; you may associate this experience with a particular person, or situation, or period in your life. Or alternatively – have you helped another person by teaching them something of a language which *you* speak?

You might want to encourage students to share what they've written, or talk about it, as part of whole-group discussion.

Here are some other things which you might think about and discuss:

- How do sounds and rhythms differ between different languages? Sometimes this can be part of the struggle in learning a new language; sometimes, it can be one of the things that's fun about it. Is this something you've experienced? In what way?
- Sometimes, there are particular experiences, or ideas, which you find easier to express in one language than another (at the moment, for example, there is a lot of discussion in the UK of the Danish concept of *hygge* – a feeling of warm cosiness – and the fact that English doesn't have an adequate word to express it). Do you have any examples of this kind of thing? Has your experience of learning a new language helped you to think about new concepts, for example; or alternatively, has it frustrated you, if another language seems inadequate to express ideas you find important?
- It can be strange and unsettling moving from a language in which you feel you can express yourself freely, to one in which you are a beginner. Do you have experience of this? How did it make you feel?

Finally, let's all do a quick bit of language-learning! Who has a word – from any language – which they'd like to teach to the rest of us? It can be anything (a beautiful word, an important word, a funny word, a powerful word, a rude word...). Teach us how to say it, and tell us why you think it's a useful word for us all to know.

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN LITERATURE

Here are some examples of poetry and prose which writers in Britain have written about the experience of language learning; and about what it means to stand outside a language or

languages, looking in. Any of them could, on its own, serve as material for discussion. They can also work well in combination. You might, for example, start by discussing Grace Nichols' 'Epilogue' together, and then divide into smaller groups on the longer poem/extracts, with each group then sharing their ideas with the whole class at the end. Some questions to consider:

- Who is the 'I' of the extract? How is she or he presented, and what do we learn about her or him?
- What sense do you get of the contexts of each piece of writing – what is its setting, and what is the speaker's relationship to that setting?
- In what ways is this piece of writing 'about' language? Which language/s are made present, and how are you made aware of them? What relationship are these language/s presented as having to one another?
- How does the experience of travelling (between countries, and between cultures and histories) relate here to the experience of learning a new language? How is this conveyed?
- How does this piece of writing invite you to think about what it *means* to learn a particular language? Are there particular images or phrases which seem to you to be particularly powerful, or thought-provoking, or surprising?

Epilogue – Grace Nichols

I have crossed an ocean
I have lost my tongue
From the root of the old one
A new one has sprung

From: Grace Nichols, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (London: Virago, 1984).

Refractions – Raman Mundair

[...]
I try
to assimilate, skipping
the *Little House on the Prairie* walk,
trying not to stand on the lines
and touching wood.
I lend myself bleached,
willing to the bone-raw,
blistered voice
unused to dialogue, broken
Punjabi jammed Bollywood Hindi
fused into a calcified
internal loop-de-loop
Meray jbutay hai Japani,
Pantaloon hai Englishstani,
Sir pail al topi Russi,
*Phir bhi dbil hai Hindustani...**
Through *Janet and John*
and *Wide Range Readers*,
I glean survival essentials
Thank you Thank you

Very much Very much
Please Please
Sorry, so sorry...
Is this the queue?
But now tell me, how
do you say that which can not be spoken
in any language? How do you say
I think I do not exist?
How do you speak,
where there are no images
of self to claim?

* A well-known classic Hindi film song, translating as: 'My shoes are Japanese, my trousers English, my red hat Russian, but still my heart is Indian...'

From: Raman Mundair, *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers and Thieves* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2003).

Hindi Urdu Bol Chaal – Moniza Alvi

(*bol chaal*: dialogue)

These are languages I try to touch
as if my tongue is a fingertip gently
matching its whorls to echoings of sound.

Separating Urdu from Hindi – it's like
sifting grains of wild rice
or separating India from Pakistan.

The sign of nasal intonation
floats like a heat haze
above new words.

Words like hands banging on the table.

*

I introduce myself to two languages,
but there are so many – of costume,
of conduct and courtesy.

I listen hard as if to sense minute
changes of dialect from village to village
from West Punjab to West Bengal.

These languages could have been mine –
the whisper of silks on silks
and the slapping and patting of chapattis on the tava.

I imagine the meetings and greetings
in Urdu borrowed from Sanskrit,
Arabic and Persian.

I shall be borrowed from England.
Pakistan, assalaam alaikum –
Peace be with you – Helloji.

It is not you I am meeting.
It is a sound system travelling through
countries, ascending and descending

in ragas, drumbeats, clapping.

*

In Lahore there grows a language tree
its roots branching to an earlier time
its fruit ripe, ready to fall.

I hear the rustling of mango groves
my living and dead relatives
quarrelling together and I search

for a nugget of sound, the kernel
of language. I am enlarged
by what I cannot hear –

the village conferences, the crackling
of bonfires and the rap of gunfire.

*

My senses stir with words
that must be reinvented.
At the market I'll ask *How much?*

and wait for just one new word
to settle like a stone
at the bottom of a well.

From: Moniza Alvi, *A Bowl of Warm Air* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Pronoun

Pronoun n word, such as she or it, used to replace a noun

First week in language school, I speaking like this:

'Who is her name?'

'It costing I three pounds buying this disgusting sandwich.'

'Sally telling I that her just having coffee.'

'Me having fried rice today.'

'Me watching TV when me in China.'

'Our should do things together with the people.'

Always the same, the people laughing as long as I open my mouth.

'Ms Zh-u-ang, you have to learn when to use I as the subject, and when to use me as the object!'

Mrs Margaret speaking Queen's English to me.

So *I* have two *mes*? According to Mrs Margaret, one is subject *I* one is object *I*? But I only one I. Unless Mrs Margaret talking about incarnation or after life.

She also telling me I disorder when speaking English.

Chinese we starting sentence from concept of time or place. Order like this:

Last autumn on the Great Wall we eat barbecue.

So time and space always bigger than little human in our country. Is not like order in English sentence, 'I', or 'Jake' or 'Mary' by front of everything, supposing be most important thing to whole sentence.

From: Xiaolu Guo, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (London: Vintage, 2008).