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978-0-521-72161-5 - Multilingual America: Language and the Making of American Literature

Lawrence Alan Rosenwald

Excerpt

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TERMS AND CATEGORIES

The Israeli critic Meir Sternberg is not very well known among Americanists, or for that matter among American literary critics generally, but his theoretical work on the representation of what he calls “polylingual discourse”¹ is the best account of it available. So there’s no better way to begin investigating the technical aspects of that subject than by setting out some of Sternberg’s terms and categories and formulations – beginning with his formulation of the basic issue here, which is that “literary art . . . finds itself confronted by a formidable mimetic challenge: how to represent the reality of polylingual discourse through a communicative medium which is normally unilingual” (222).

Sternberg first identifies three ways of “circumventing” (223) the challenge. The first, “referential restriction,” involves confining one’s literary attention “to the limits of a single, linguistically uniform community whose speech-patterns correspond to those of the implied audience”; Sternberg cites as an example the novels of Jane Austen. The second, “vehicular matching . . . suits the variation in the representational medium to the variation

¹ Meir Sternberg, “Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis,” *Poetics Today* 2:4 (1981), p. 222. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this work will be given in the text.

Sternberg “deliberately avoid[s] the sociolinguistic terms ‘multilingual’ and ‘monolingual,’ which are (and should be) used to characterize the linguistic range of a single speaker or community. In contrast, a work may be said to represent a polylingual reality of discourse even though each individual speaker or milieu is strictly monolingual, and to represent a unilingual reality of discourse even though each speaker is potentially multilingual. The terms are thus complementary” (222n). Useful distinctions of category, but not, in my judgment, easy to maintain by these distinctions of term; I’ve sought to observe the latter but not the former.

“Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis” is Sternberg’s most important essay on this subject, but see also “Proteus in Quotation-Land: Mimesis and the Forms of Reported Discourse,” *Poetics Today* 3:2 (1982), pp. 107–56; “Point of View and the Indirections of Direct Speech,” *Language and Style* 15 (1982), pp. 67–117; and *Hebrews between Cultures: Group Portraits and National Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). My thanks to Professor Sternberg for his encouragement, and for guiding me to the latter three of these four works.

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in the represented object” – that is, whatever languages characters are imagined or identified as speaking are the languages they actually are made to speak. Sternberg’s examples, one film and one play, are Jean Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion* and Shaw’s *Pygmalion*. The third, “homogenizing convention,” is in play when an author, having decided to represent a multilingual community, “dismisses the resultant variations in the language presumably spoken by the characters as an irrelevant, if not distracting, representational factor” (224). Thus Carroll’s White Rabbit and Shakespeare’s Romans and Italians speak English, Homer’s Trojans speak Greek, Vergil’s Greeks speak Latin.

As noted, these are for Sternberg ways of “circumventing” the challenge. He reports on them fairly, and the terms he devises for them have the technical specificity of good legal jargon, but in his view their “extremity . . . frequently disqualifies them from serving as viable artistic strategies” (225). He argues in particular against vehicular matching, on the ground that it is “too inconsistent with the normal conditions and prerequisites of communication in art as well as in life.”²

What he favors more is what he calls “translational mimesis,” or “mimetic compromise” (225). Here too he has devised apt terms, four in particular. (1) “Selective reproduction” – that is, “intermittent quotation of the original heterolingual³ discourse as uttered by the speaker(s), or in literature, as supposed to have been uttered by the fictive speaker(s)” (225). A characteristic example (mine, not Sternberg’s) is in Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*: the conversation in the first chapter between Albert Schearl and his wife Genya. It’s identified as taking place in Yiddish, but almost all the quoted speeches are in English. Then, at the very end, we get two speeches in Yiddish: “Gehen vir voinen du? In Nev York? . . . Nein. Bronzeville. Ich hud dir schoin geschriben” (“Will we live there? In New York? . . . No. Bronzeville. I already wrote you”).⁴ (2) “Verbal transposition” – that is, “the poetic or communicative twist given to what sociolinguists call bilingual interference” (227). Examples are: “the literally rendered Spanish idioms in Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*” (228), or every time an English “thou” is used to express a putative original *tu* or *du* in French or German or Yiddish.⁵ (3) “Conceptual reflection” – that is, a strategy aimed at rendering

² Sternberg, “Point of View,” p. 88.

³ Sternberg uses “heterolingual” (sometimes “heterophone”) to “denote a foreign language (or dialect) – usually a language other than that of the reporting speech-event” (222n). I too use that term.

⁴ Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Noonday Press, 1991), p. 16. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this work will be given in the text.

⁵ Sternberg rightly distinguishes between this strategy and what happens when an author is simply reproducing the linguistic-interference-affected speech of a character, e.g., the wonderful scene in

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“not so much the verbal forms of the foreign code as the underlying socio-cultural norms” (230). Sternberg gives a striking example, from the Second Book of Samuel. In Hebrew, *elohim*, “God,” is plural in form but treated as singular. When the Philistines use it, though, they treat it as a plural, reflecting the biblical author’s sense of their more polytheistic theology: “these [are] the gods [*elohim*] who smote the Egyptians,” they say. Much representation of Native American speech is similar in this regard; it is filled with metaphors drawn from nature, and seeks to represent, not the grammatical structure of Native American languages, but a nature-centered worldview being attributed to the Native American mind. (4) “Explicit attribution” – that is, “a direct statement on the reporter’s (or even the reportee’s) part concerning the language (or some aspect of the language) in which the reported speech was originally made” (231). A simple example, from the passage in *Call It Sleep* cited previously: “‘And this is the Golden Land.’ She spoke in Yiddish” (11). Presumably Sternberg would also want to include here not only statements naming languages, but also statements characterizing them – for example, in Kate Chopin’s “La Belle Zoraïde,” “she told [the story] to her mistress in the soft Creole patois, whose music and charm no English words can convey”⁶ – though he gives no examples of this latter sort of comment.

Having set out these terms, Sternberg makes some shrewd remarks about how critics should use them. He notes that one might be tempted to rank the strategies in “degree of quotational interference” (232), from smallest degree to greatest, from most faithful to least: vehicular matching, selective reproduction, verbal transposition, conceptual reflection, explicit attribution, and homogenizing convention. But he argues, justly, that doing so would be wrong, for two reasons. First, such a scale “classifies types or aspects of translational mimesis rather than texts or textual segments” – an error because each mode “may variously coexist and interact with the others within a given textual framework.” Second, such a scale suffers from “the failure to distinguish formal mode and functional system” (233); “in different contexts,” he notes, “the same translational form may serve different functions and the same function may be served by different forms,” and he stresses the importance of passing “from the typology to the functionality of translational mimesis” – that is, what is the author seeking to do?

Casablanca where two prospective emigrants to America sit in Rick’s café and practice their English: “What watch? Six watch,” they say, badly translating *Wieviel Uhr? Sechs Uhr*.

⁶ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 196.

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THE LIMITS OF WHAT'S POSSIBLE

Sternberg is a good enough critic that even when he's wrong, it is illuminating to work out one's own view in relation to his always exact and forthright account of his. As, for instance, his view – which reflects an unspoken and unexamined consensus among literary critics generally – of “vehicular matching.” Its “extremity,” he says, “frequently disqualifies [it] from serving as [a] viable artistic strateg[y],” in “a communicative medium which is normally unilingual.”

But “normally” is not an argument; creative writers are always doing things that aren't “normal.” And like vehicular matching, some of those things make reading difficult – for example, Joyce's wonderful rendering of the stream of consciousness in *Ulysses*, or Gertrude Stein's of the repetitions of human speech in “Melanctha.” We shouldn't make a cult of such difficulty. But we should approach the question of what is “viable,” even if difficult, with an open mind.

The following texts, among others, are pertinent to answering that question, because all of them go further in vehicular matching than Sternberg's work would make one think possible, and all are works of accepted distinction.⁷ (1) Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, full of passages in French, both in conversation and in the narrative, dispersed throughout the novel. (2) H. Rider Haggard's *She*, the chapter called “The Sherd of Amenartas,” filled with pages and pages of Greek and Latin and Old English texts. (3) Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, with the extended French-language conversation presented by its German narrative in the chapter called, appropriately enough, “Walpurgisnacht.” (4) Helen Lowe-Porter's translation of the same novel, which retains the French material as is. Translations even more than original works are “normally” unilingual, but Lowe-Porter's noble choice to flout that norm did not keep her translation from being widely read, or from contributing to Mann's international reputation. (5) Jeannette Lander's *Ein Sommer in der Woche der Itke K.*, a German novel filled with dialogue in transliterated Yiddish. (6) Theresa Hak-Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, in English but interspersed with passages of French (some translated, some not) and photographs of Korean. (7) Dolores Prida's play *Coser y cantar*, about half Spanish and half English, neither translated for a reader knowing only one, with its magnificent stage direction, “this play

⁷ It is important that all these works are narratives or theater pieces. We accept multilingualism more readily in poetry than we do in fiction or drama; in film, subtitling makes vehicular matching easy. Fiction and drama are the crucial cases here. For further remarks on genre and the representation of multilingualism, see below, pp. 11–13.

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must NEVER be performed in just one language.”⁸ (8) Tony Kushner’s play *Homebody/ Kabul*, a patchwork quilt of English, Dari, Pashtun, Arabic, Russian, French, German, and Esperanto.

None of these is as challenging to read as would be, say, the unedited transcript of a good many conversations going on in subway cars in cosmopolitan cities. Each, except maybe Prida’s play, has a single dominant language. But each is capaciously open to at least one other language, and each has a history of critical and readerly success. Taken together, they imply that vehicular matching is a more useful artistic strategy than we often presume it to be; our standards of critical judgment should take account of that.

DIALECT AND LANGUAGE

For Sternberg, the literary representation of the multilingual world and that of the multidialectal world are essentially similar; *La Grande Illusion* (French and German) is one example of vehicular matching, *Pygmalion* (Cockney and Standard British English) is another, with no consideration being given to the difference between them. Sternberg’s view of this matter is widely shared. William Stanley Braithwaite, for example, bases his argument for an exact literary representation of African-American English on Frédéric Mistral’s exact literary representation of Provençal.⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, rightly claiming that accepting her own “legitimacy” means accepting as legitimate “all the . . . languages [she speaks],” lists among those “languages” such speech varieties as “Standard English,” “working class and slang English,” “Standard Spanish,” “Standard Mexican Spanish,” and “North Mexican Spanish dialect.”¹⁰

The common view is wrong. But it is not implausible, because the differences between the two tasks of representation are complicated, and it is an important view to scrutinize, not only because it helps us get rid of a common misconception, but also because disentangling the two practices helps us understand more precisely what is actually involved in each of them.

First, though, a clarification. Too often colonizers have used “language” to refer to what they themselves speak, “dialect” to refer to what the colonized

⁸ Dolores Prida, *Coser y cantar*, in *Beautiful Señoritas and Other Plays* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1991), p. 49.

⁹ Henry Louis Gates, “Dis and Dat: Dialect and the Descent,” in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 181.

¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), pp. 55, 59.

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speak. That is nonsense and worse, and the best intellectual antidote to it is a celebrated remark attributed to the Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich: “a language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” There is a useful distinction to be made between the two terms, as when we say that Yiddish is a language, then distinguish within that language its Litvish, Polish/Galician, and Ukrainian dialects. That is a distinction of kind, and worth making. There is no use in a distinction between the two terms that claims to be a distinction of value.

When I walk into a first class on *Huck Finn* and ask students for their initial reactions and questions, often a student will say that she had a hard time reading Jim’s speeches. Then I suggest reading those speeches aloud, or describe Twain’s technique for representing pronunciation, and after a while, the student usually finds the difficulty diminishing.

When I walk into a first class on *Angels in America*, on the other hand, and a student asks about Emily’s bewildering speeches in Act III, Scene 2, asks what they mean or for that matter what language they’re in, the only thing I can do to help her is to tell her the answers – that is, that Emily is speaking in Ashkenazic Hebrew, and that what she is saying is a prayer for the dead; there is no technique of skilled reading to employ here, nothing to say about Kushner’s means of representing Ashkenazic Hebrew that will enable the student to read it. Reading other languages doesn’t get easier unless readers actually go out and learn them; what readers are confronting here is not difficulty but impossibility.¹¹

The representation of non-standard speech varieties in their own language invites readers to confront and interpret the diversity *within* that language, within that speech community – diversity of class, region, education, occupation, age. The representation of heterophone languages forces readers to confront and interpret the multiplicity of speech communities in the world, the impossibility of understanding the speech of communities other than their own, their own position in the labyrinth of languages.

Fictions representing multiple languages through vehicular matching are rare. Fictions representing multiple dialects by that means are common; for example, to cite only some noted American examples, much work by Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Joel Chandler Harris, Mark Twain, George W. Cable, Henry Roth, Zora Neale Hurston, Eugene O’Neill, Alice Walker, and August Wilson. Writers seeking to represent multiple dialects seldom avail themselves of the indirect

¹¹ For some reason, students in my experience are *less* likely to ask questions about Emily’s speeches than about Jim’s.

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strategies Sternberg identifies. “‘I shall be there tomorrow morning,’ he said in the diction and cadence of a Mississippi plantation-owner” is not a sort of sentence we often encounter; instead the writer seeks to reproduce that cadence and diction.

It is because this is the case, probably, that there are disputes among writers about whether and how to have characters speak in non-standard dialects, and none that I know of about whether and how to represent multiple languages. Since it’s a real possibility, it’s worth arguing about. Braithwaite argues for it:

[Dialect] may be employed as the langue d’oc of Frederic Mistral’s Provençal poems, as a preserved tongue, the only adequate medium of rendering the psychology of character, and of describing the background of the people whose lives and experience are kept within the environment where the dialect survives as the universal speech; or it may be employed as a special mark of emphasis upon the peculiar characteristic and temperamental traits of a people whose action and experiences are given in contact and relationship with a dominant language, and are set in a literary fabric of which they are but one strand of man in the weaving.¹²

James Weldon Johnson argues against it, at least as regards African-American English, because of “the limitations on Negro dialect imposed by the fixing effects of long convention.”¹³ (Johnson is thinking of the “long convention” of the minstrel show, with its “unrealistic – indeed, insidious – archetypal portraiture of the black man as a head-scratching, foot-shuffling, happy-go-lucky fool.”) Henry James argues against it more generally, denouncing “the riot of the vulgar tongue” across the board:

The thousands of celebrated productions raised their monument but to the bastard vernacular of communities disinherited of the felt difference between the speech of the soil and the speech of the newspaper, and capable thereby, accordingly, of taking slang for simplicity, the composite for the quaint and the vulgar for the natural . . . The monument was there, if one would, but was one to regret one’s own failure to have contributed a stone? Perish, and all ignobly, the thought!¹⁴

Pro or con, long-winded or concise, general or specific, these writers have something in common; as they work out their positions, dialect writing is in fashion, almost a norm. There has not yet been an influential fashion for language writing, and it has certainly never been a norm, so no one needs to take up its cause or fend it off.

¹² Quoted in Gates, “Dis and Dat,” p. 181.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁴ Henry James, “Preface to *Daisy Miller*,” in *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. R. P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner’s, 1934), pp. 279–80.

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No extant writing system is solely a means of representing pronunciation. That means that the representation of multiple dialects involves using a writing system in two different ways, or in a sense using two different systems.¹⁵ The first is whatever is standard – for example, the way I am using the English writing system in this book, holding to its orthography and punctuation and capitalization rules, which do not vary from one writer to another according to dialect, do not reflect the difference between how I would read these words and how my Canadian neighbor would. The second is non-standard, has a less stylized, more mimetic relation to pronunciation, and does vary according to dialect. The two systems are not parallel; to use Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux's terms, one system is a writing system, the other a transcription system.¹⁶ The former results from the long labor of a community, the latter from the ad hoc work of an individual.

The representation of multiple languages is different. It is most different when both or all of the languages represented have writing systems of their own, as in many of the multilingual fictions cited previously. In the German text of Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, for example, the French-language remarks of Hans Castorp and Claudia Chauchat are notated as they are not to represent either character's pronunciation, in particular Castorp's no doubt German-influenced one, but because that is how standard French orthography requires Mann to notate them. French and German are not being given equal time, or equal importance; but they are being represented by equal means.

Sometimes, though, the heterophone language does *not* have a writing system. Sometimes a heterophone language with a writing system is written with a different alphabet from that of the dominant language, with no established rules for representing it in that language, nothing like the YIVO rules for romanizing Yiddish or the pinyin rules for romanizing Chinese. In such cases – and such cases are prominent in this book – writers seeking to notate a heterophone language have to devise a transcription system for it, and in their texts that system will be juxtaposed to the dominant language's writing system. In such cases, the representation of multiple dialects and that of multiple languages are more alike.

¹⁵ I speak only of alphabetical writing systems; I do not know how other writing systems, e.g., the one devised for Chinese, represent multiple dialects or second-language interference.

¹⁶ Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux, *Écrire en créole: oralité et écriture aux Antilles* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994), pp. 11–38; see also Geoffrey Sampson, *Writing Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), especially the chapter on English.

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But still not identical. Notating a non-standard dialect means adjusting a writing system, pushing it in the direction of representing pronunciation, but not jettisoning the system altogether. And it is because one retains the basic system that its dialect-representing modification can be read with relative ease, at least after one has gotten used to it, and often with pleasure; William Dean Howells, for example, wrote to George Washington Cable after reading *The Grandissimes*:

Deuce take you, how could you do it so well? . . . My wife kept reading me that first call of Frowenfeld's on the Nancanou ladies till I was intoxicated with their delightfulness. Oh the charm of their English! We speak nothing else now but that dialect.¹⁷

Notating a heterophone language by means of a transcription system is often very unlike that. Consider one of Khwaja's Pashtun speeches in Tony Kushner's *Homebody/ Kabul*: "Dah bah ghalatah kar wee cheh dah khuzah woo wah hal shee. Hagha yaway milmana dah ow dah kho de mil mastiyah deh oosool puhrrkhalahv yaway kar-wee" ("It would be wrong to beat her, she is a guest, our guest, it would be offensive to the laws of hospitality to –").¹⁸ How are we to read that? What kind of information can we get from it? Where words end, where sentences end, and something about pronunciation – but not very much, only coarse information, since we haven't been told how to read this system, and no information at all about stress, either within words or over the span of sentences. Compared with Mark Twain's portrait of Jim's speech in *Huck Finn*, this is a very blurry image.

Sometimes, of course, the heterophone language is a lot closer to the dominant one than Pashtun is to English. Consider the first creolophone utterance of Alfred Mercier's francophone novel, *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*: "Vous pa oua don, Michié? . . . cé nég pou vende" ("You don't see, Sir? . . . they are Blacks to be sold").¹⁹ The historical record suggests that a good many readers had trouble figuring out what such utterances

¹⁷ Quoted in Arlin Turner, *George W. Cable: A Biography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1956), p. 99. Note also Turner's remark that "like Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and others afterwards, [Cable's friend and discoverer Edward King] spoke in Creole, he said, and he scattered Creole expressions through his letters" (54).

¹⁸ Tony Kushner, *Homebody/ Kabul* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2002), p. 48. The translation is given in Kushner's text.

This is a play, of course, and in the theater the audience would hear the pronunciation as the actor had worked it up. But plays have a real existence as read texts, not just as performed ones, and it's as a read text that it's being considered here.

¹⁹ Alfred Mercier, *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars, ou, Maîtres et esclaves en Louisiane (Récit social)*, ed. Réginald Hamel (Montreal: Guérin, 1989), p. 79.

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meant, nor can the francophone character to whom this particular speech is addressed understand it; but anyone who can read French can figure out what it sounds like. As can Germans reading the Yiddish parts of Jeannette Lander's *Itke K.* – for example, “Oi! Itkele, in der alten Heem is alles, alles, andersch gewe'en” (“Oy, little Itke, in the old home [i.e., when we lived in Poland] everything, everything was different”).²⁰

But even here a distinction needs to be made. Dialect orthography renders, sometimes successfully, the pronunciation of particular groups of people and particular individuals. It can do that because readers who know how the writing system works normally can interpret it when it is working non-normally. With Mercier and Lander, though, we cannot tell whether what's being offered us is a standard orthography or an altered one, an image of what the heterophone language sounds like generally or what it sounds like when spoken by a particular character.

The underlying point, constant despite the surface variation, is that when an author represents the dominant language with a writing system and heterophone languages with transcription systems, a false impression is given, an impression of inequality. (This need not be, and often is not, the author's intention; it is simply a consequence of the situation.) German and French are equally languages in *Der Zauberberg*, English and Spanish equally languages in *Coser y cantar*. But though English and Pashtun are equally languages in the world, they are not equally languages in the text of *Homebody/ Kabul*, because the systems used to represent them are not parallel; Pashtun – or any other heterophone language represented by a transcription system – *looks* like a dialect, whatever its actual linguistic status.

The distinction between multilingual fictions and multidialectal ones is best dramatized by Mark Twain, in a conversation in *Huck Finn* as good as almost anything in Plato:

“Why Huck, doan' de French people talk de same way we does?”

“No, Jim; you couldn't understand a word they said – not a single word.”

“Well now, I be ding-busted! How do dat come?”

“I don't know; but it's so. I got some of their jabber out of a book. Spose a man was to come to you and say *Polly-voo-franzy*– what would you think?”

“I wouldn't think nuff'n; I'd take en bust him over de head. Dat is, if he warn't white. I wouldn't 'low no nigger to call me dat.”

²⁰ Jeannette Lander, *Ein Sommer in der Woche der Itke K.* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1971), p. 15. If one translates the sentence into German as a German might do on reading it, one can see, even without knowing German, how similar the two sentences are; the German would be, “Ach, Itkelein, in dem alten Heim ist alles, alles anders gewesen.” Lander may in fact be pushing the Yiddish towards German; a more standard Yiddish would be, “in der alter heym iz alts, alts andersh geven.”