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978-0-521-58353-4 - Milton's Languages: The Impact of Multilingualism on Style

John K. Hale

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

*Milton's languages in the context of renaissance
multilingualism*

Multilingualism: the ability to use three or more languages, either separately or in various degrees of code-mixing . . . different languages are used for different purposes, competence in each varying according to such factors as register, occupation, and education.¹

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Milton's formal education emphasized languages, especially Latin and Greek, and further that he practised and applied his languages (some ten of them) lifelong, in the course of reading or translating or composing. It is less often asked what exactly his possession of languages meant to him in the vicissitudes of a busy life, whether as ends in themselves or for access to texts in their original, and whether as means to thought or as resources of stylistic choice. These questions deserve a sustained exploration.

To supply it, we should first see Milton in the most pertinent context, namely renaissance multilingualism. Here is a humanist who wrote poems in four languages (Latin, Greek and Italian as well as his mother-tongue) and whose voluminous prose is almost half in Latin; a lifelong polyglot whose writings evince knowledge of three Semitic languages and further modern languages. How far does Milton typify his milieu, how far does he transcend or ignore or flout it?

A provisional sense can be gained by situating him in relation to a number of key linguistic or languages-related issues. These include: (a) the *Questione della Lingua*, the question whether (or when) to write in Latin or the mother-tongue; (b) languages as access to the springs of religion and thought for the Christian humanist; (c) the practice and norms of humanist education; (d) related broader questions of *Imitatio*² and intertextuality. *Imitatio*, here, means 'emulation', not slavish copying. In order to emulate the exemplary poets and thinkers of the multilingual past, the renaissance humanist strove to use their thought as texture *without* perpetrating pastiche. The resulting intertextuality is the index of

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the emulation but also its criterion; that is to say, while the ancients are a felt presence, recognized in diction and allusion and much else, the humanist has failed utterly if the reader's attention is held by nothing but the debts. A fifth language-issue is more speculative: (e) the question, was the past to which languages gave access more of a burden than an opportunity to the humanist, leading one home or into exile, and as double vision, was it a source of curse or blessing? Finally, (f) was Milton's attitude to languages typical or exceptional in his age, so that we may perceive the purposes for which he acquired and maintained them?

LATIN AND THE VERNACULARS

Latin was the *sine qua non* of an educated person. It was a triple gateway: to preferment, to the intellectual life of antiquity, and to active membership of the European intelligentsia. Nonetheless, the grandeur of Rome's long history made its language potentially overwhelming. The dilemma of the renaissance humanist was, how to absorb and exploit antiquity through its languages without being dwarfed by these languages' axiomatic, definitive greatness. Would one succeed better by writing in Latin, the actual words of the ancients, or in the mother-tongue? And if in Latin, which Latin? Cicero's alone, or something more mixed? Or if in the mother-tongue, how should one purge it of a grossness felt when comparing it with Roman exemplars? Moreover, which version of it was to be used, in times when regional variations stood out more than later when nation-states had made vernaculars more uniform?

Since the issues impinged on different populations in different ways and at different epochs, I summarize the crucial developments chronologically so as to place Milton's individual resolution of the dilemma. This has to be done in a European as much as in an English context, for three reasons: internationalism inheres in language-study; it inheres peculiarly in the choices of a renaissance multilingualist; and certainly Milton himself saw the question in European terms. I begin my necessarily cursory account with Italy.

Italy first confronted (and so named) the *Questione della Lingua*, the language-question. From 1300 to 1550, from Dante through Landino and Bembo to Ariosto, Italians argued whether or when to use their *volgare*. Italians spent time, talent and energy on the *Questione*. One should not oversimplify the range of their positions, nor ironize their choice of Latin prose to explain their choice of Italian for verse. What counts is,

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that despite renaissance Italy's having so many, vying vernaculars the vernacular was preferred, even as early as Dante. As for Milton, since in general he knew Italian literature and culture intimately, and Ariosto is the particular predecessor whom he cites³ in making his own declaration for the mother-tongue, he may have known more of the Italian debate.

A modern analogy helps clarify the issue. It resembles that posed for postcolonial nation-states, of the 'cultural cringe', which is antipodeans' metaphor for the 'cultural inferiority complex' which they may feel towards the older and richer culture of Britain or Europe. Henry James felt a version of this, the complex fate of being an American drawn to Europe's older culture yet repelled by it. Similarly, the sheer dominance of Latin culture for many renaissance poets might arouse anxiety and a concern with positioning, to accept and exploit their complex fate.

Every generation of the Renaissance had to think the *Questione* through, so gravitational did the pull of Latin remain till after Milton. It was Latin which enabled the humanist to study and teach anywhere; Erasmus in England, Buchanan in France. No humanist ever voted for the vernacular at the expense of Latin's portability, and we usually notice a sense of sacrifice or regret about the choice of one language over another for one's most important work. In Italy, at any rate, the struggle over the *Questione* was long and difficult, and even to some extent precarious.

In France, the sixteenth century saw the emergence of the French language as not merely one possible and less esteemed option for poetic utterance. In a struggle that was shorter than that of Italian, but still an agonized one, French in the sixteenth century supplanted Latin for verse. Even though as in Italy the regional tongues were still far apart, the Pléiade movement centring on Dorat, Du Bellay and Ronsard achieved a French prose and verse which settled the *Questione* permanently in favour of a purified vernacular. Yet the supplanting was not done without loss and paradox.

The loss and paradox may actually interest us more than the outcome. Because we *know* Latin died, there is the danger of becoming Whig historians intoning deterministically over its demise. Buchanan, who wrote in Latin and could not have joined in as francophone, worked amicably with the Pléiadistes. Du Bellay called French his wife and Latin his mistress. He says, 'The one is beautiful, the other pleases more', perhaps because he is less tied to Latin than to the mother-tongue. He expressed this, and many of his best thoughts on the topic, in Latin, no doubt to savour the paradoxes of interplay between the medium and

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message. One such paradox is that in representing themselves as the first champions of classical standards for literature in French the Pléiadistes belittled their own originality. Paradox itself pleases, and dignifies the linguistic self. And 'the rivalry of the two [languages] intensifies their linguistic and cultural interaction . . .' so that 'read from inside, as it were, the texts of the humanists and their vernacular counterparts seem to draw from their very uncertainties, from their protean shifts of style and intellectual context, an unfailing supply of colour and energy'.⁴

In other countries, there were other outcomes. In Germany, 'Latin was more easily accepted as the main language of culture and intellectual life. Many Germans, unlike the French, considered their native tongue to be barbarous.'⁵ In general, the smaller the country, or the less self-confident the language-community, the readier it was to talk and think in Latin and thus tap into wider resources.

The English position was both more and less clear than the French. It had established its vernacular by 1500 as the language of law and government, and by 1540 of the church as well, supplanting both Latin and French. Yet if *publishing* in Latin be the yardstick, it was on the increase until the Civil War.

Especially does this hold for the publishing of Latin verse, from the two university presses. J. W. Binns has shown⁶ how Latin verse was written at university not solely as an exercise but to gain attention and consequent preferment. Unlike his friend Charles Diodati, unlike his older friend Alexander Gil, unlike Herbert and Marvell and Crashaw and Cowley, Milton (though not averse to fame) wrote no Latin verse for the teeming anthologies on royal occasions. He seems to have rejected this, along with other career paths, in the 1630s. We can speak of 'rejection' because he wrote much Latin verse, and kept it, yet none was published though the means and fashion would prompt this. We cannot say for sure why this talent was not to be shown on a wider stage in those years, while his English verse was. But we may infer that it seemed not to belong to his search for his major vocation, and perhaps that he did not want the display of his Latin talent to serve Cambridge in the years of Archbishop Laud's predominance. (I return to this in chapter 2.)

In 1628 at Cambridge, if not before, Milton addressed the *Questione*, 'At a vacation Exercise in the College'. As he put it in *Poems, 1645*, 'The Latin speeches ended, the English thus began: – Hail, native language . . .' (Hughes, p. 30). There follows a 54-line digression, or rather invocation, asking help from the personified mother-tongue. Although Latin is not criticized nor rejected, he is very explicitly turning away from

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Latin, towards English, for help with serious future subjects: 'some graver subject' (line 30), such as a glimpse of the gods in heaven (33–46) or 'heroes old' (47). The fact that the passage is a digression, and is bilingual on the subject of a bilingual's choice, shows what is on his mind at the age of twenty-one. The moment is prophetic of Milton's eventual, mature choice of poetic tongue.

Nonetheless, he continued to write in Latin verse after Cambridge. He experienced on his pulse the value of Latin for poetry and other purposes when he went to Italy in 1638. If he had been disposed to reject Latin as too Laudian a medium (contrast Crashaw), it opened different doors for him in Italy, such that he rapidly resurrected his *poemata* and composed more.

But much latelier in the private academies of Italy, whither I was favoured to resort [I perceived] that some trifles I had in memory . . . met with acceptance above what was looked for, and other things which I had shifted in scarcity of books and conveniences to patch up amongst them, were received with written encomiums, which the Italian is not forward to bestow on men of this side the Alps . . . (*Reason of Church Government*, Hughes, pp. 668–9).

He says it was this encouragement, received for his Latin verses in Italy, which clarified if it did not engender his sense of vocation, and its sense of English as its direction and medium. It was in Italy that he finally gave up Latin for major verse, doing so from a position of strength. With the Italians' own example all round him it was one of the most deliberate and responsible choices even he ever made: he knows what he is giving up, namely the chance to speak in poetry to his Italian friends and to the intelligentsia of Europe, since *English* to them was the unknown tongue of a small offshore people.

Paradox invigorates his Latin verse renunciation of Latin verse:

Omnia non licet uni,
Non sperasse uni licet omnia.⁷

(One person can't do everything, nor even hope to do everything.)

Moreover, paradox is not all, because this is a counterfactual wish that one *could* do everything, and could in this case hold both native-language and international audiences rapt. The thought of doing something for his country merges with doing it for glory, which however is a circumscribed glory. The poem is a farewell to more than its subject, his closest friend: I shall argue later that he lays Latin verse-making itself in Diodati's grave.

This process of choice during his twenties and thirties will be explored further in chapter 3. Already, though, we sense its dialectical quality, the twists and turns, the reassessment of pros and cons.

Before leaving Italy Milton has chosen his medium by thinking what is his most-desired audience, and then the rest follows by decorum. He chose Latin or English accordingly thereafter: he chose Latin for European or pedagogic consumption, English for the *History of Britain*. The choice of tongue reveals fundamentals about the particular act of thought. Though that is obvious, in these days of reading-in-translation it is readily forgotten.

Let me make it explicit. If choice was Milton's great theme, and 'reason was but choosing', it included language-choice. Language-choice was both precondition and part of the utterance. Time and again, he makes a theme out of his language-choice. He does it for purposes which we can, for the moment, summarize as sense of occasion, mimesis and paradox.

LANGUAGES FOR READING AND FOR OTHER USES

Granted then that renaissance humanists were ipso facto bilingual, and experienced the cognate tensions of choice when composing, in their reading most were in fact *multilingual*. As my epigraph has it, they possessed the 'ability to use three or more languages, either separately or in various degrees of code-mixing . . . [so that] different languages are used for different purposes, competence in each varying according to such factors as register, occupation, and education'.

Obviously Greek even more than Latin fed their obsession with classical antiquity, by giving direct (not shaky because derivative) access to the authors who had civilized Rome itself. Milton's Greek was very high-powered: witness that he made emendations in the text of Euripides which modern scholarship has confirmed and accepted.

But Christian humanists, who sought *pietas litterata* ('learned piety' or 'educated faith')⁸ for themselves or influence on the Reformation at large, had to have equal access to the three 'sacred languages' – Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The first two of these were the languages of the two Testaments. Greek was furthermore the tongue of the Septuagint, and Latin of the Vulgate: both these translations had (and retain) special standing in biblical hermeneutics. Biblical scholars in large numbers, others in smaller numbers, acquired the three languages for use together on the Bible.

Milton was among them, but acquired also Aramaic and Syriac. Aramaic is the original language of some later writings of the Old Testament, not very different from biblical Hebrew.⁹ Syriac is the language of an influential transmission of the New Testament.¹⁰ Here, Milton's language-acquisition exceeds the ordinary. His reading knowledge of the five classical languages was most purposive, pursuing alike the austerities of literary scholarship and the countless applications to religion (which in turn embraced both spirituality and controversy).

More still, the languages of Athens, Rome and Jerusalem were not separate. Latin absorbed much Greek. Hebrew and Aramaic entered Greek in the Septuagint and (differently) in the New Testament. All march on into the Vulgate's Latin. The three languages interact, kaleidoscopic and specific in effect. Milton moves freely among the interactions, for example using Septuagint Greek within his own Greek psalm version. The wealth and complexity of interactions among these original tongues gives him powerful choice.

Italian, to him the most interesting of the vernaculars, worked to similar effect but extended his choice still wider. Besides standing closest to Latin, for instance in pronunciation, Italian had most renewed its poetic and expressive resources from Latin. Milton not only wrote Italian sonnets, but learnt to impart a Latin density and *gravitas* to his English verse style from the work of Della Casa and Tasso. Milton also went back to the first champion of the *volgare*, Dante, for intertextuality and architecture alike. Just as Dante had let Virgil and Latin shape his narrative and texture respectively, so did Milton, albeit differently (see chapters 6–8). Italian was thus fundamental to his vocation as a poet. Italian gave a rationale and confidence to this vocation.

Beyond these tongues, Milton also read French.¹¹ He may have spoken French on his travels through France, but the best visible evidence of his using French is provided by a number of entries from French historians which he made in his Commonplace Book. Spanish was attributed to him by an Italian friend, Francini.¹²

German or Dutch have been ascribed to him by modern writers, along with Old English. The last-named may well be wishful thinking. In principle, one might wish for the multilingual poet to have entered into his mother-tongue's earliest recorded form. In particular, too, Miltonists have wished to relate his Satan to that of the Genesis 'B'. Evidence is sparse, but there is some. In the *History of Britain* he misunderstands passages of Latin chroniclers which a knowledge of Old English would have clarified for him.¹³ As for German, there is only slight evidence for

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his knowing it. Better evidence records that he was read to in Dutch.¹⁴ His languages may, then, amount to ten: English, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Italian, French, Spanish, Dutch.

Impressed, as we should be, we should then ask: do his ten languages known, and four composed in, have any parallel in his world?

They do. Language-acquisition and language-display both made part of that world. Witness the Oxbridge anthologies, honouring royalty with multilingual tributes. These centred on Latin with Greek, but further flaunted more *outré* accomplishments, like Turkish and Persian. Witness, too, such display-pieces as are found in the writings of the much-travelled Thomas Coryat – Italian verses flattering James's queen. Precisely because these Englishmen's displays are gauche or fulsome or eccentric, if not all three, they make Milton look abstemious and judicious, in that for *Poems, 1645* he prepares poems in only four of his languages, thoughtfully balanced into two pairings (see chapter 1).

More serious multilinguists still found it worth writing in several different languages. Naturally enough, since continental multilinguists lived among overlapping language-areas, they were more numerous, and more serious about multilingual praxis than the English showmen and dilettantes. Thus when it is recorded of Elizabeth Jane Weston, who settled in Prague, that she was fluent in German, Czech and Italian as well as the more usual English, Latin and French, we would guess that she had occasion to use all of them, in life as in her poetry.¹⁵ The Dutch, then as now, excelled. Thus the poet P. C. Hooft brought together at meetings in his castle a distinguished company who composed each in a different preferred language. 'Barlaeus wrote almost exclusively in Latin; Hooft mainly in Dutch, but also . . . in Latin, French and Italian.' Constantijn Huygens 'wrote not only in Dutch but also in Latin, French and Italian and occasionally in Spanish, Greek, English and German'. A comparable German polyglot is Georg Rudolph Weckherlin: he wrote a cycle of poems in four languages – German, French, English and Latin.¹⁶

Moreover, we know the varied purposes for which some continental multilinguals used their languages. Forster (pp. 39–40) movingly describes how Hooft tried to express his grief for the death of Brechje Spiegels by writing her epitaph in six different languages; not satisfied with any, he reverted to Dutch, the mother-tongue for the simple essence of his praise for lost love. Equally, the seriousness of Huygens and Weckherlin is sensed in their self-restraint, their awareness that the many tongues are not of equal standing for the poet using them.

Precisely this, again, emerges from the comparison of these notable

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continental polyglot poets with Milton. They are *differently* polyglot, and purposefully so. The multilingual reading or writing comes from within them, not from externalities of display or coterie. And just as the needs of his intellectual life had made Milton already of this serious, pragmatic class of multilinguist, so political need would have done so. It is symptomatic that Weckherlin's successor as Secretary for the Foreign Tongues in Whitehall was Milton himself. His activities as a translator or composer of state papers is not a focus of this study, but his readiness to do such things for the Parliament in his country's long crisis typifies – as much as his patriotism or ideology – his kind of multilingualism.

THE PRACTICE AND NORMS OF HUMANIST EDUCATION

Humanist education was grounded in the ancient tongues but also in the principles and practice of ancient rhetoric.

Because Latin was begun young, composition in particular would begin in Latin (and then Greek) as soon as in English. To compose Latin verse was second nature to such as Marvell and Milton. In the case of Marvell it is even possible that where his lines exist in both Latin and English he composed them in Latin first;¹⁷ and though we cannot check this for Milton, the education they underwent would make the budding humanist more at home in Latin for some purposes than in the mother-tongue.

Latin was the medium of instruction as well as its content, and the work was oral as much as written – indeed increasingly so, as pupils progressed up the school and on to university. As formal education proceeded they did more and more discrete things with their Latin. The comparison today would be with a country such as India, where 'English-Medium' on a school's front door is a great selling-point, and English is perceived as the avenue to almost every professional career.

This Latin education was largely for the sake of developing proficiency in rhetoric. Rhetoric included both creative writing and dramatic performance in Latin, giving the pupil a command of topics, figures, levels of style, stances towards subject and audience, and a sense of audience, along with knowledge of a pantheon of exemplary ancient exponents. The lack of division (curricular or theoretical) between poetry and rhetoric, since both alike were persuasive eloquence, enabled poetic speech to be rhetorical and oratory to be poetic, at first in Latin but really in whatever language was being used.

All this Milton absorbed – much like everyone who underwent the

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training. When later in life he conducted controversy, he used all the familiar methods in the familiar manner. I do not share modern misgivings about Milton's rhetoric as excessive, since polemic was (and is) polemical. The aim of lawyers, for example, is to win cases, and of politicians to win votes; and if personal abuse helps, so be it. Assuredly, the force of rhetoric was one of the most influential, if not the single most influential, part of the legacy of antiquity in the Renaissance. So when Milton waxed polemical, Latin became for him, not a musical instrument, but a cosh.

Another emphasis of his language-learning needs to be recaptured here. To learn a language, the student was made not only to translate from original language to target language, and the reverse, but even to go round a circle of languages, finally back to the original.¹⁸ Such retranslating is hard but not stultifying (unless one is gifted or cursed with photographic memory): the pre-existence of an authoritative original provides a check and model for how one is to think one's way into the language, its thought-forms and idioms. The value of the 'circle' method is that where words and ornaments are bound to be left behind, the thought is seized, ready to be expressed in whatever tongue. Paradoxically, then, so verbal an exercise trains one in skills of thought, as much as skills of words. Certainly all Milton's psalm versions show his grasp of the thought, first and foremost. Then, as paraphrast, he incorporates words of other translators, or makes up his own expansions. These five-finger exercises gave to him the freedom of a great many ways of thinking and creating, albeit not more than to others who had had the same training.

But as he outgrew such exercises of pedagogy he did not outgrow care for the words themselves; far from it, for his verse-translating moves *towards* literalism. He is not content after all with giving only the bald sense of a Psalm or a Horace ode: he presses English to a variously conceived maximum of fidelity. In this, whether we like the product or loathe it, he outgoes his contemporaries (see chapter 4). He is heeding Horace's topos of the 'fidus interpres', 'faithful interpreter', by coming to favour its 'fidus' element. This has a bearing on the text-studded texture of *Paradise Lost*: it makes the poem sometimes odd, more often sublime, and always distinctive (see chapters 6 and 7).

IMITATIO AND INTERTEXTUALITY

By practising *Imitatio*, the renaissance humanist sought to build something original and personal from inherited materials, and to do it by