



“Bridges between the eternally separated”: Adventures in the Universal Language

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For most Europeans, the English language is unescapable. French people of my generation were literate in not only words but in a whole range of English-language references long before they'd had an opportunity to use them in everyday conversation. Nintendo games often made their way to our provincial towns by way of English, the unifying language of the West. As such, badly translated Japanese multimedia was as much a part of my language, growing up, as the language in which I was taught to read and write, or the language in which American sitcoms were dubbed on TV. A toy Casio computer I owned as a child produced a daily horoscope in English, which I was determined to decipher, so seriously did I take its prophecies of the future. Every device in my house or anywhere could be switched 'on' or 'off': the little red light, glowing, meant 'power.' In the 90s, Germany, France, Italy, and Spain shared an avid taste for American grunge music. Only marginally less remote, the lyrics of Brit pop songs haunted me without my always knowing what they meant. My first attempts at comprehension were perilous: a dictionary does not account for everything, contractions bemused me, slang evolved too quickly for paper editions. Later, as a student of English





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Literature, I moved from Paris to London. Suffice to say, I was not fluent. I mistook things for others. I laughed at jokes I had not even heard. But the experience of hearing what standard spoken English was actually supposed to sound like was captivating. Eventually, living and making friends in England made me begin to understand that there were many denominations and sub-genres to the universal language; that it could be local and vernacular and unorthodox and idiosyncratic and blundering and drunk and provincial as well as standard. And I realised this also: few native English speakers were conscious of their power, scarcely realising that the entire planet was mentally travelling to be able to communicate in their terms.

The Unreality of the Textbook

First, the tasks one has to comply with when learning the grammar of a foreign language are tedious and seem to trivialise everything they touch upon. Learning German or Spanish will require that you talk – slowly, awkwardly – about what you just ate for breakfast, by which means of transportation you came to class, and what sports you play on the weekend. You lose your eloquence when speaking a language in which you are very obviously limited: for this reason many will reflect that their efforts in speaking an alien language make them sound a bit vacant or rob them of the depth of their social identity. Recent sociological studies have suggested that people may develop alternative





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personalities in the foreign languages they learn to speak: new traits to make up for the ones that have been shed. Some perhaps find in language acquisition a freedom to reinvent oneself.

Russian-born novelist Vladimir Nabokov, who enjoyed a trilingual cosmopolitan education, allegedly learned to read English before Russian, the tongue which he already spoke. He remembers the odd but memorable dialectics of his English textbook, which relied on the unremarkable adventures of four bland male protagonists, adventures which only expanded so far as the very limited vocabulary and grammar available for each individual lesson would allow.

My first English friends were four simple souls in my grammar – Ben, Dan, Sam and Ned. There used to be a great deal of fuss about their identities and whereabouts – “Who is Ben?” “He is Dan,” “Sam is in bed,” and so on.

The false credulity with which Nabokov reads the textbook’s non sequiturs in this passage speaks to the modest progress of the language learner – and the existential feeling which linguistic confinement and repetition produce. The result is a mockery of what even fiction should be: stilted images, aimless prose, meandering characters: ‘Wan-faced, big-limbed, silent nitwits, proud in the possession of certain tools (“Ben has an axe”), they now drift with a slow-motioned slouch across the remotest backdrop of memory.’



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Yet Nabokov remembers how, as he progressed through the pages of the textbook, longer words appeared, and at the very end ‘a real, sensible story unfolded its adult sentences (‘One day Ted said to Ann: Let us –’) Access to this story became the pupil’s true reward: ‘I was thrilled,’ he writes, ‘by the thought that some day I might attain such proficiency.’ Even in adulthood, the last page of a language textbook, to him, meant ‘a forbidden glimpse of the student’s future, of that promised land where, at last, words are meant to mean what they mean.’

Nabokov dramatises the way in which our worlds shrink and become unreal in the absence of an appropriate vocabulary to speak of them. I remember similar textbooks which, by a contaminating effect, gave off the impression of a culture that was parodic or limited, that Spain was forever trapped in the 80s, that all English people ever did was drink tea, go to school in prissy little uniforms, and perform daily routines while calling out to each other by their monosyllabic first names. The unreality of the textbook, one day, is supplanted by the reality of the country. The “promised land” Nabokov speaks of is not, in my mind, a metaphor, and everything gets turned on its head when both language and culture materialise before your eyes and you become the abstract foreigner within it. A walking textbook, counting your tools.

Not Going Home

I first heard British English spoken to me in the city of Oxford on the occasion of a school trip in the Spring 2002. Valiantly, without encouragement, I addressed shopkeepers, taxi drivers, and museum guides with all the English I was able to summon, and to my shock and delight, they understood me, and talked back at me. My English teacher was a middle-aged southern Frenchman with an impatient and excitable temperament and a penchant for self-tanning lotion, but he never failed to take his job seriously. In the classroom, he would suspend attention to all but the essential music of spoken English, which he would play on cassettes or else try to perform himself: ta tatata tata-ta, a rhythm and tonality that were absent from French which, I then pondered for the first time, was a monotone language in comparison.

On my last morning in Oxford, having been dropped off at the school bus's meeting point an hour early by my suburban landlady, I noticed something odd by the side of the road. Somebody, presumably a local youth, had removed the outer packaging of a couple of sanitary pads and pasted them to the door of a public phone box. Being a momentarily unsupervised teenager with time to kill, I decided to see what might happen if I brought the flame of a pocket lighter to the edges of this provocative structure. The fire took surprisingly quickly, and as I started trying to put it out with the sleeve of my coat, I saw a tall, balding man run

out of a nearby off-licence which he was presumably about to open. ‘What the FUCK do you think you’re doing?’ he shouted at me, and the first thing I noticed was that the music was flawless, tonic, and natural. I told him, with a newfound semi-fluency, that I was really sorry, that it was a stupid thing for me to have done, that I was on a field trip with my school from France and that I was waiting for the bus to come pick me up. ‘Well then go back,’ he said, about half-way through my sentence. ‘Go back to your FUCKING country, and whatever you do don’t FUCKING come back!’ The man had rage in his eyes and it occurred to me that I had not often been spoken to in this way by an adult, but I came home proud with the certitude that I had captured an English exchange that was way off textbook, way off convention – in a word, real. The violence of the exchange, which I attribute partly to the idiocy of my behaviour, and partly to my apologetic avowal of being a foreigner in someone else’s country, didn’t deter me from coming back to the UK a few years later.

James Wood’s essay ‘On Not Going Home,’ published in the LRB in 2014, discusses the strange, unstable reality perceived by the immigrant in their adopted country, a sense of alienation which can be as enriching as it is at times unsettling, and which can never be completely erased, no matter how many years spent there, no matter how peaceful the circumstances of the initial move. Making a distinction between his affluent, comfortable émigré status as a British academic in America and the plight of great writers of exile such as Nabokov, but also W. G. Sebald,

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Aleksandar Hemon or even the fictional characters of their respective works of fiction – the protagonists of Sebald’s *The Emigrants* for example – Wood’s essay summarises what about that ontological experience of alienation is common to all experiences of exile, emigration, and cosmopolitan, transatlantic living, whether the initial move is a choice or a necessity.

Wood has a strong interest in émigré writers for the way they write about the world from a slightly marginal perspective. He sees similarities between his own heightened receptiveness to the foreign quotidian in the United States and the sensitivity rendered through literary accounts of life in exile. He writes of the sound of American trains, which he views as idiosyncratic and which he suspects “must also be ‘the sound of America’ for thousands, perhaps millions of non-Americans.” This reminded me of a passage in *Lolita* where the European narrator describes the sound of trains going by in the dead of night and registers it as a mournful, ominous, and “desperate scream.” With *Lolita*, Nabokov made a bet with himself that he could become an American writer, but it is arguably his acute émigré sensitivity to America and Americana that makes the novel so vividly American.

My life outside of France began with my Erasmus year in September 2007, almost ten years ago. What was meant to be a year abroad turned into a longer period of life which I can’t quite bring myself to call exile, and yet which has born experiences that are very much in tune with the exilic

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sensitivity Wood describes. Soundscapes and cityscapes in and around London have become familiar in a way that could never negate their essential cultural otherness to me, yet their flavour has become such an intrinsic feature of my daily life that I find myself missing it whenever I leave and wherever I go. Inexplicably, I feel intimidated by American accents when I travel. If and when I find myself surrounded by Brits, I find reassurance in the sounds and inflections of their voices. Something in my linguistic and cultural sensitivity has been altered, this nebulous fact confirmed and encapsulated in the evolution of my own accent over the years. People say that the French tend to conserve a strong accent no matter their level of fluency in English. Someone in New York once said to me: "I do not know where you're from, but you sure have spent a lot of time in London." Proof, in my mind, that against cultural stereotypes, all the homes occupied in a lifetime make you, that an individual never ceases to be produced by their environment.

For all his interest in musicality and sound, Wood does not really touch upon the notion that is generally referred to as the 'language barrier.' Many of Wood's examples of exiled writers are authors who wrote in English as a second language, and became internationally famous for doing so. Wood briefly evokes Samuel Beckett's exile into the French language and introduces the idea of his return 'home' to English when, in the last years of his life, he reverted to his mother tongue in the letters he wrote to his publisher. But the exile into English language experienced by the other

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writers he speaks of is not generally, to my knowledge, reversed. Nabokov wrote everything but private letters in English towards the end of his life. Hemon, whose English has been compared to Nabokov’s in its combination of fluency, style, and unorthodoxy, has now settled in Chicago and he only writes in English. This dimension of their exile is not considered by the British writer who, though he writes about “not coming home” – and from a position of exilic hyper-receptiveness to American life – nevertheless pens the essay in his native tongue without questioning the advantage or comfort which comes from being able to do so.

Linguistic isolation can be an element of emigration, one which is partly overlooked in the context of the UK’s linguistic insularity. As a native English speaker, Wood forgets the supremacy of English over all languages of the world, a supremacy which goes with the dominance of the West under the umbrella of the old British colonial empire. It underpins the invisible journeys of writers acquiring fluency in their second language for economic and political reasons. This, precisely, is what determines the difficulty of negotiating a return from English to a tongue which is not universal. English, in the digital age, is nothing short of literacy. Knowledge of any other language, in comparison, appears as a form of cultural sophistication.

At the end of his essay, Wood writes that he longs for a postcolonial literature that could blur the distinctions between ‘homelessness, displacement, emigration, voluntary

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or economic migration, and even flaneurial tourism,’ speaking for an experience of emigration which has become ‘more complex, amorphous and widespread’ than ever before in history. Access to an English-speaking readership is a key condition of the existence of such texts on the global literary stage. World Literature is World Literature in translation. How essential is it, for the exiled writer today, to be able to write and read aloud in fluent English? Perhaps more essential than we think.

The Universal Language that Colonised Our Subconscious

Back when I was learning English at school in the 90s in northern France, we were required to choose two Modern Languages from the meagre range on offer, to be studied between the ages of 11 and 15. Our options were further limited by the fact that English had to be one of them. English, teachers and parents would say, is the universal language. They may not all have been able to speak and read it themselves, but they hoped that one day we would, for such was their understanding of the future we were headed for. Learning English at school in this context was a mixture of geopolitical necessity and traditional regard for the country which first produced this potent language: the United Kingdom, a country which, by virtue of the same global processes which had ensured its tongue’s primacy, had become more and more of a fiction over the years. In the textbooks of our minds, it was a country ruled by an



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ageing Queen in pastel suits, where people drank black tea with milk, where impeccable Protestant restraint coexisted, somehow, with beer-drinking hooligans, punks, and the Spice Girls. It was a country where, we were told, people were all at once more strict and more tolerant, less sanguine and more eccentric. More believable – more familiar, somehow – to continental Europe was and still is the notion of the United States, which we see represented so much more frequently in the media – more often than we see representations of our own countries – and whose culture and politics we discuss as if they were close to us.

German filmmaker Wim Wenders, whose aesthetic preoccupation with the United States is politically ambivalent, talks about the influence Hollywood movies and pop culture had on his upbringing in post-World War II Dusseldorf. In a poem titled ‘The American Dream,’ he reflects on America’s capacity to turn itself into an image and sell itself as such worldwide:

No other country in the world has sold itself so much
And sent its images, its self-image
With such power into every corner of the world.

One of the two main protagonists in Wenders’ 1974 road movie *Kings of the Road* complains that ‘Americans have colonised our subconscious,’ a sentiment which chimes with Wenders’s position in his lifelong dialogue with U.S. culture. In this and others of his films, the cultural and





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economic hegemony of the U.S. is built into the European landscape, visible through an abundance of Coca Cola vending machines and jukeboxes playing American records. In Wenders’s universe, America is both inaccessible and culturally omnipresent in the full swing of global capitalism. His international sensitivity comes with his fluency in English and other languages, and his written work suggests there is an additional layer of remoteness between continental Europe and America which can only be addressed by crossing the language barrier. The poem ‘The American Dream’ differentiates between America, the country as it is seen from the inside, and Amerika, in the German spelling, whereby the change of one consonant indicates the exteriority of the perspective.

English, it is implied, may have colonised Wenders’s subconscious via America, surviving internationally through American culture. The presence of English in our lives has grown exponentially with personal access to digital media. French secondary school students of my generation, ever-resistant and determined to score poor grades in all foreign languages, used to make it a point of honour to suck at English. Since our schooldays, however, many of us developed a digital literacy which has required the practice of English. As such, the average level of English spoken by millennials may not be textbook-perfect, but it goes some way beyond the merely functional: it is expressive, knows emphasis, swearing, slang, acronyms, stuff that I didn’t find in paper dictionaries. Stuff that apps like Duolingo today



have structured themselves on.

A Second Language for Everyone: Notes on Esperanto

Esperanto is a constructed language created in 1887 by a Jewish-Polish eye doctor named Ludwig L. Zamenhof. Though he lived and worked in Russia, the concept for the language initially came to him as an answer to the ethnic divisions which existed in Bialystok, his native city in Poland. Zamenhof believed that language barriers fostered conflict and the conception of Esperanto aimed to allow the promotion of a ‘neutral’ second language for all, which had no political baggage and through which people could speak in equal terms. But Esperanto never quite became the international second language facilitating communication worldwide. English became that tool, not through utopian idealism, but through conquest.

I had forgotten Esperanto until Duolingo reminded me of its existence but, much as with Klingon, a language designed by the creators of Star Trek – soon to be available on the app – it appeared to me that users would only want to learn it as a joke, a nod to a very limited community of language dweebs. Who speaks Esperanto today? The website esperanto.USA.org encourages new learners of Esperanto, ‘a second-language for everyone,’ stressing the very ‘natural’ feel of the language which, ‘because of its high ratio of vowels to consonants, is often said to resemble Spanish or



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Italian.’ Despite this attractive similitude to existing Roman languages, Esperanto is often considered less enticing than ‘natural’ languages; devoid of an accompanying culture and history, it is not currently considered a viable language for the context-hungry school syllabus.

‘Why does anyone learn Esperanto?’ asks a 2008 article on BBC.co.uk, published after Littlewoods Direct launched an ad campaign set on a Caribbean island, where a utopian – and improbable – society ruled by women are pictured using Esperanto. Lanarkshire resident David Kelso says he took a correspondence course in Esperanto age 14 and has used the language ever since to communicate with correspondents worldwide. ‘If you want to travel the world and speak to people in equal terms,’ he says, ‘then Esperanto is the way to do it. You’ll never achieve that through English.’ The article suggests that Esperanto (which means ‘one who hopes’) has been held back by ignorance and prejudice, but in the comments section someone rightfully points out that its main drawback might be, precisely, its similarity to those other European languages. How not to see another form of imperialism in the assumption that Esperanto might be a viable option for a universal language to Japanese or Arabic speakers?

Digging for material on Esperanto at the British Library I found a booklet, belonging to the digitised World War One collection, titled *A World Language: Why Not Esperanto?* This article, originally published in 1916 by The Link, was written





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by Margaret L. Blaise, a British pioneer in the Esperanto movement. Author of a previous language manual for the Esperanto learner, Blaise aims at convincing readers of the utility of learning ‘an auxiliary language’ when language diversity in wartime had been ‘a great barrier to intercourse between the Allies.’ There is no doubt, according to Blaise, that the language barrier will remain an obstacle to the peace negotiations needed for the formation of a new international order. The article points, therefore, to the urgent need for a ‘lingua franca,’ and to the fact that this language supposedly already exists in the form of Esperanto, which was

offered to us by our big ally Russia, cradled for us by our friend France, especially recommended by our ward Belgium, schooled and tested in all civilized countries of the world, and now standing, waiting at the commercial doors of all the nations.

‘Who will be the first to admit it,’ Blaise concludes, “Britain, America, or Germany?” I think about what it means, to come across this manifesto a hundred years after its publication, in 2016, the year when England voted to leave the European Union.





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Zarathustra's Companions

Academic research and my own personal tastes have led me to take a special interest in the works of émigré artists – Nabokov, Wenders, the Swiss photographer Robert Frank, and Britain's own Alfred Hitchcock. Doing research in America in the third year of my PhD, I was surprised to find that established film professors there admitted to thinking of Hitchcock as an American filmmaker – ‘are you sure we can talk about him as an émigré?’ – when Nabokov was forever remembered as a Russian expat. Was this due to the language barrier, I thought? Though Nabokov's English was quite exceptional in the acrobatics of its style and its semantic richness, video recordings of rare televised interviews show that he spoke it with an indelible Russian accent, forever signalling his foreign awkwardness to others. He hated making public speeches, insisting on his need to have everything written down in advance, in the private laboratory of his hyper-linguistic mind. Recently, trying to read into the symbolism of the wheel in Hitchcock's cinema, I came across a passage from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* which made me think about the way speech variations are often used to represent difference and otherness. When he is first told of the concept of eternal recurrence, the buoyant prophet-like hero Zarathustra goes through a period of intense emotional distress, an insurmountable sense of void which produces a dramatic shift in his character and condemns him to a period of aphasia. *Zarathustra's* companions, representatives of all species across the animal





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kingdom, eventually manage to stir him from this depressive episode. Seeing as he will not stir to eat the food they bring him for his recovery, they speak out and tell him that the world at the foot of his mountain is eager and waiting for his return. It would seem from Zarathustra's reply that it is not so much what they say as the way they say it which moves Nietzsche's titanic hero to appear again into the world and to redevelop a hunger for contact.

O my animals, answered Zarathustra, talk on thus and let me listen! It refreshes me so to hear your talk: where there is talk, there is the world as a garden to me. How charming it is that there are words and tones; are not words and tones rainbows and seeming bridges between the eternally separated? To each soul belongs another world; to each soul is every other soul a back-world. Among the most alike does semblance deceive most delightfully: for the smallest gap is most difficult to bridge over. For me – how could there be an outside-of-me? There is no outside! But this we forget on hearing tones; how delightful it is that we forget! Have not names and tones been given to things that man may refresh himself with them? It is a beautiful folly, speaking; therewith dances man over everything.

What moves Zarathustra is the tones in which the animals speak, which are all different because of their belonging to different species in the animal kingdom. It is not the variety of the food brought to Zarathustra's bedside which





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stirs his appetite for living; it is the challenge and desire to communicate through this difference. Difference, it is implied, is refreshing because it is an invitation to get out of oneself. In hearing the tones now, after having forgotten their essential variety, Nietzsche’s allegorical hero can measure the separation between his cognitive apparatus and that of others. The contemplation and recognition of this separation, in this passage, produces the humility one may feel when confronted with irreconcilable otherness, which is the essence of love and communication.

To learn to speak in a new language is to unsettle your relationship with the world, and your unspoken belief that the signified is contained within the stability of a unique signifier. Any given language, with its many tones, accents, and inflections, is a maddening reminder that though I inhabit the outside world – and have even learned to live outside of my native country – I cannot live outside of myself, can never share subjective grounds with my fellow Earth-dwellers. My effort in learning English derives, to an extent, from my desire to bridge that separation. In its universality, English may still be one of the most efficient tools we possess to do so.



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