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“A screeching as of jackdaws”: Sounds, Noises, and Incomprehension as Aspects of Literary Multilingualism

Abstract: This article discusses the field of “literary multilingualism,” proposing a wider definition of the concept, which would include instances of language usually not regarded as language proper: sounds, noises, and incomprehension. By foregrounding this acoustic dimension of literary multilingualism, tacit assumptions regarding language borders are highlighted and put under critical scrutiny. The article furthermore stresses the need to take readers’ diverse linguistic backgrounds into account when studying the aesthetic effects of literary multilingualism. The theoretical argument is supported by readings of Franz Kafka’s short story “An Old Manuscript” (1919) and an excerpt from Cia Rinne’s poetry collection *notes for soloists* (2009).

Keywords: Cia Rinne, Franz Kafka, language borders, literary multilingualism, monolingualism

The field of literary multilingualism is presently growing in European and US academia, situated at the intersection of comparative literature, critical multilingualism studies, and language philosophy. Scholars such as Doris Sommer and Yasemin Yildiz have demonstrated how multilingual literature has the ability to work through and challenge widespread conceptions of language, mono-, and multilingualism alike (Sommer 2004; Yildiz 2012). The question of how, exactly, one should define and conceptualize multilingual literature is, however, still a contested issue.¹ In this paper, I suggest that, instead of regarding multilingual literature as a deviation from monolingual literature, we should turn the tables and regard any kind of literature as potentially linguistically diversified – although of course to varying degrees. I think this is necessary if we want to challenge the resilience of the monolingual paradigm, following Yildiz’s definition of monolingualism as a “key structuring principle of modern social life,” and approach, for

¹ See the overview of different attempts to define literary multilingualism in Tidigs and Huss (2017).

example, canonized, national literatures as potentially multilingual.² In trying to pursue such an approach, I am inspired by Till Dembeck's suggestion of a possible outline for a philological approach to literary multilingualism, in which he stresses the particularity of every literary text, rather than adhering to a general definition of literary multilingualism (Dembeck 2014).

Related to this topic of how to approach the field and the term "multilingual literature" itself, I would also like to underscore the need to pay more attention to the role of diverse readers and reader communities, and to the various effects that are produced in the interaction between literary texts that we choose to analyse as multilingual and the roles of different readers. Julia Tidigs and I have argued for the need to include a multimodal approach to literary multilingualism, one that not only highlights the readers' active role in making multilingualism happen, but also takes into account the dynamic between the acoustic and visual aspects of literary multilingualism (Tidigs and Huss 2017). This paper attempts to foreground the acoustic aspect of literary multilingualism, and proposes that we, as scholars focusing on literary multilingualism, should widen the scope of our research to include also those instances of language usually not counted as language proper in our analyses. The title of my paper lists "sounds, noises, and incomprehension" as aspects of this kind that I wish to focus on. We need to focus on these seemingly peripheral phenomena, I argue, since they highlight the borders of what we usually tend to regard as language and what tends to be discarded as superfluous or uninteresting. Furthermore, sounds, noises, and incomprehension are all parts of our everyday phenomenological experience of language, whether we know the language in question or not – the acoustic materiality of language, the sphere sometimes imagined to be beyond semantics and communication.

There is no clear-cut division to be drawn between the realm of sounds and the realm of language: the sounds and noises of one context can be identified as the building blocks of a language in another context. Literature has the ability to heighten our sensitivity to the acoustics of language itself, an ability to arrest the reader's desire for instant comprehension and instead open up the sphere of a strange but captivating foreign linguistic territory. Stephen Connor has described

2 "For monolingualism is much more than a simple quantitative term designating the presence of just one language. Instead, it constitutes a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as of imagined collectives such as cultures and nations. According to this paradigm, individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one 'true' language only, their 'mother tongue', and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation" (Yildiz 2012, 2).

this sphere, or perhaps this acoustic dimension cohabited by sounds and languages, in the following manner:

If the two extremes of human existence are the animal or biological being of the body, and the power of thought and self-representation given by language, then the realms of sound, voice and music lie between body and language. They are no longer merely body, for they are the emanations of the body, the body put forth or doubled. But neither are they yet language, in the sense of grammar, syntax, or semantics. Rather, they are the body of language, sometimes thought of as the inert mass of form out of which music will be shaped, or words selected, sometimes as an unchallenged impetus or power. (Connor 2017, 4)

I will return to the topic of languages, sounds, and noises in literature soon, but first I wish to clarify my use of concepts and the theoretical frame of my approach.

There is of course a difference between sounds and noises on the one hand (as phenomena that can appear in literature, as motifs or in the structural dimension of the text), and incomprehension on the other (as an effect experienced by the reader, or as an experience on the part of a protagonist described in the literary text). But sounds and noises are, nevertheless, connected to the experience of linguistic incomprehension, if incomprehension is defined as “not being able to translate” the foreign or alien piece of text into a coherent, semantic unit. The question of whether or not a text is considered to be intelligible language or incomprehensible gibberish – a random cluster of sounds and noises – depends, of course, on the context and its recipient, and this can, in turn, give rise to various effects on the reader or the listener.

Here, I follow Doris Sommer’s argument in her book *Bilingual Aesthetics* (2004) and Julia Tidigs’s reasoning in *Att skriva sig över språkgränserna* (2014). They both focus on incomprehension as an aesthetic effect experienced by the reader of the multilingual literary text, in which case lack of linguistic knowledge might work as an asset and not just a problem to be solved: incomprehension or partial comprehension can work as an invitation to consider the linguistic foreignness of a text as a sphere of experimentation and de-automatization of everyday language usage, to use a well-known formalist term.

In this context, the work of the scholar Monika Schmitz-Emans (2004) is particularly interesting, since it shows the historical roots of thinking about incomprehension as an aesthetic asset. In her article on “alien” scripts and bodies of texts from the Romantic era up to present times, as well as in the tradition of German-language philosophy represented by, for example, Johann Georg Hamann, she illustrates how Hamann insists on the aesthetic qualities of different written languages in his own writings. Their particular typographical shapes in terms of visual artefacts, but also their sonorous qualities are important – qualities that have the power to arrest the reader’s desire for instant translation and comprehen-

sion. In fact, Schmitz-Emans argues, it is exactly this rationalist desire for instant comprehension and the extraction of meaning into an abstract sphere of thought somehow considered to be beyond language that Hamann vehemently criticizes. Instead of striving towards translation and comprehension, we should pay attention to the visual and sensual characteristics of language, in other words, its aesthetic qualities – that is Hamann’s main point, according to Schmitz-Emans.

In order to follow a similar train of thought and to make my argument more tangible, I would like to discuss two literary examples where the spheres of language and sound are connected, and how they can help us reflect on incomprehension as a productive instance in the analysis of literary texts that in some way may be considered multilingual.

This brings me to the quotation in the title of my article, “a screeching as of jackdaws,” a quote from Franz Kafka’s short story “An Old Manuscript” (“Ein altes Blatt” in German; trans. Muir and Muir 2002), written in 1919 and published in the short-story collection *Ein Landarzt* (Kafka 1919).³ This short piece of prose is not to be considered a multilingual piece of literature, if we by this term refer only to the presence of multiple, clearly distinguishable languages in the text in terms of “foreign” lexical units or the like. But if we allow ourselves to consider “incomprehension” and the experience of linguistic foreignness in some sense as a category of multilingual literature, then Kafka’s “Ein altes Blatt” presents a highly interesting example of the latter.

The story is narrated by a cobbler living in the capital of a country that has recently been overrun by nomads from the North, who are camping with their horses in the city square. The Emperor’s palace has withdrawn its soldiers behind locked gates, and the inhabitants in the city are now left to be helplessly exploited and plundered by the invaders. Communication or any kind of understanding with the nomads, the reader learns, is impossible, and the locals are forced to watch their city face ruin, unable to offer any kind of resistance since the Emperor’s palace remains shut. The story closes with the following sentences: “Uns Handwerkern und Geschäftsleuten ist die Rettung des Vaterlandes anvertraut; wir sind aber einer solchen Aufgabe nicht gewachsen; haben uns doch auch nie gerühmt, dessen fähig zu sein. Ein Mißverständnis ist es; und wir gehen daran zugrunde” (Kafka 1919, 48).

I will not go into the various interpretations that have been made of this short story – for example that it should be read in the light of the collapsing Aus-

3 Kafka’s short story is also discussed briefly in Tidigs and Huss (2017).

tro-Hungarian Empire and the rise of nationalism and anti-Semitism.⁴ Instead, I want to highlight a passage concerning the language of the nomads, characterized as “hardly” a language at all by the narrator:

Sprechen kann man mit den Nomaden nicht. Unsere Sprache kennen sie nicht, ja sie haben kaum eine eigene. Untereinander verständigen sie sich ähnlich wie Dohlen. Immer wieder hört man diesen Schrei der Dohlen. Unsere Lebensweise, unsere Einrichtungen sind ihnen ebenso unbegreiflich wie gleichgültig. Infolgedessen zeigen sie sich auch gegen jede Zeichensprache ablehnend. Du magst dir die Kiefer verrenken und die Hände aus den Gelenken winden, sie haben dich doch nicht verstanden und werden dich nie verstehen. Oft machen sie Grimassen; dann dreht sich das Weiß ihrer Augen und Schaum schwillt aus ihrem Munde, doch wollen sie damit weder etwas sagen noch auch erschrecken; sie tun es, weil es so ihre Art ist. Was sie brauchen, nehmen sie. Man kann nicht sagen, daß sie Gewalt anwenden. Vor ihrem Zugriff tritt man beiseite und überläßt ihnen alles. (Kafka 1919, 42–44)

In my interpretation, I will focus my attention on the noise of the foreign language in this case. The almost absolute foreignness of the nomads’ language is here described in terms of a noise, a “Schrei der Dohlen,” that has invaded the soundscape of the local inhabitants in the same manner as the nomads have occupied the city square. In the ears of the cobbler, this language can hardly be counted as one, since it brings to mind animal sounds, and animals – by common definition – lack a language in the human sense of verbal communication. The description of the sound of language as animal noise thus renders the nomads animal-like and non-human, a fact that is reinforced by their lack of rational agency and free will, as in the quoted passage about the nomads’ habit of making grimaces: “sie tun es, weil es so ihre Art ist.” Even though the word “barbarian” (*Barbar*) does not occur in the story, there is a parallel to the Greek origin of the word as a designation for a person who does not speak Greek but speaks in an inarticulate, stuttering manner – and to how these seemingly absent linguistic faculties are, in turn, associated with cruelty and primitivism.

Kafka’s short story also brings to mind attempts made by European travellers and linguists efforts to describe the click-consonants in Nguni languages such as Zulu and Xhosa, as studied by Judith Irvine and Susan Gal. They demonstrate how these click sounds were compared to animal noises such as “hens’ clucking, ducks’ quacking, owls’ hooting,” and hence considered brutal and primitive (Irvine and Gal 2000, 40). Irvine and Gal (2004, 40) quote the German linguist

⁴ Marek Nekula (2006, 142), following Hartmut Binder, interprets the nomads as an allegory for the Eastern European Jewry, with the “screeching as of jackdaws” (“jackdaw” is *kavka*, pronounced [kafka], in Czech) illustrating Yiddish and “die sprachlose jüdische Identität” [the tongueless Jewish identity].

Max Müller, who in 1855 wrote: “I cannot leave this subject without expressing at least a strong hope that, by the influence of missionaries, these brutal sounds will in time be abolished.”

The language noise of the nomads in Kafka’s story, the “screeching as of jackdaws,” does not refer to any existing language outside the realm of the literary text, although it is of course possible to speculate about what Kafka might have referred to. Instead, I want to suggest that the lack of reference to an actual, existing language – the fact that the reader is confronted with the presence of a foreign language, an implied language eluding any direct access by the reader – is precisely the point here. The linguistic foreignness of the nomads’ noise-speech de-automatizes our understanding of what a language is, and conversely encourages the reader to listen to the sounds and noises of his or her own language or languages. There is, naturally, no guarantee that such a self-critical reflection will take place on the part of the reader, but a careful study of Kafka’s short story and the confusion of the cobbler confronted with the nomads – “Ein Mißverständnis ist es; und wir gehen daran zugrunde,” he states in the end (Kafka 1919, 48) – points in this direction.

The narrator’s language description in Kafka’s short story, as well as the linguist Max Müller’s description of the click-consonants in Nguni languages, have something important to teach scholars of literary multilingualism and multilingualism studies in general. The reason for this is not to be found in the disregard and contempt for the languages in question demonstrated in these descriptions, but rather in the attentiveness to how the foreign tongues sound, and the imagery associated with it. This, in turn, exposes fantasies around what we count as language and what we disregard as mere noise. As Douglas Kahn has noted, “noise” is usually understood as that which disturbs communication, such as “imperfections in script, verbal pauses, and poor phrasing” (Kahn 1999, 25). As his work on the history of sound in the modernist arts demonstrates, however, noises and sounds should not be defined as the opposite of meaning, as somehow transcending signification as opposed to an articulated language. They are, on the contrary, part of a social, cultural, and political space imagined by humans. In this view, instances of “noise” in multilingual literature *do* signify in many important ways, and furthermore have the potential to help us rethink common theoretical assumptions in the field of literary multilingualism.

My second example is a more recent one, from a work by the poet Cia Rinne, published in the suite of poetry *notes for soloists* (2009). In the case of Rinne’s *notes for soloists*, we are dealing with a multilingual text in the more traditional, textual sense: Rinne mixes instances of different languages such as English, German, French, and Italian in her poetry. The texts are furthermore characterized by a tension between the visual (in terms of letters, typography), sound (as

expressed by the letters, differently with regards to different languages), and semantics (as in, for example, homonyms). What is striking about the collection *notes for soloists* is the tendency for different words and linguistic fragments to be inhabited by many languages simultaneously, depending on the particular reading and reader of the text. The poetic text resembles a musical score in this way, turning the reader into a performer and co-producer of the poetic text. To read Rinne is to enter the space between body and language, the realm of sound, voice, and music that Stephen Connor describes in the quotation given earlier.⁵

This active participation of the reader that the text demands is also encouraged by Rinne's multimedial literary practice. Her writing takes place on multiple material levels: in the shape of printed poetry collections; in digital, online versions that play with the possibilities of linking visual signs and letters via hyperlinks and online animations; as sound collages of her own voice reading the poems; as well as in her live, singular performances. To read Rinne's poetry is – against this background of multiple possibilities where the visual and sounding character of language often overpowers the semantic force of the words in question (especially if the reader is not familiar with the particular language involved) – to experience a productive incomprehension, if incomprehension is understood as not being able to translate a particular piece of text in a straightforward manner. There will almost always be sections and sentences that cannot be pinned down to one particular language in Rinne's text, and this, in turn, forces the reader to consider other possibilities of articulation, but also of a constant re-negotiation of language borders: a simultaneous de- and reconstructing of them.

To conclude my argument, I wish to briefly present one possible reading of the third part of the section “Milano notes” in *notes for soloists* (see illustration). The point here is to illustrate how Rinne's poetry gives rise to very different readings, depending on the particular reader's language skills as well as reading strategies.

The heading's geographical reference to the Italian city of “Milano,” and hence its proximity to the Italian language, seems to offer little help if we attempt to read this excerpt monolingually in Italian, apart from the last two lines, “il” and “sole” (the definite article that corresponds to masculine nouns and the Italian word for “only”). The first word is clearly the French word for “sun” (at least for those readers familiar with the French language). Since the earlier sections of *notes for soloists* play with multilingual possibilities of different word combinations, the reader is likely to try out different languages here as well: “so” could simultaneously be read in English, or in Swedish as the word for “sow”; the “lei” in the third line can be understood as the middle fragment of the French “soleil” –

5 Cia Rinne's *notes for soloists* is also discussed in Huss and Tidigs (2015).

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* soleil
  so
    lei
      i
        o
          e l
            le
              so i
                sol
                  le
                    soleil
                      il
                        sole

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Fig. 1: From Cia Rinne's *notes for soloists* (Rinne 2009, [11]).

in line with this excerpt's visual structure, which disassembles/plays with the first line's "soleil" and the word's individual parts in different combinations. On an acoustic level, however, "lei" pronounced as part of the French "soleil" also produces the English word "lay," perhaps encouraging the reader to identify other possible English words in the section, such as "i" and "o" (as in "oh"). In terms of the semantic coherence of the poem, the reading of "so" as Swedish for "sow" might be considered erratic compared to the other possible lexical articulations of "sun," "only," and "lay." At the same time, many of the section's lines could in fact be read in Swedish: "i" (meaning "in"), "le" (meaning "smile"), "sol" (meaning "sun"), and "il" (meaning "gust").

As seen in this example, the text displays bi- and multilingual parts of words from different languages, as well as passages that are so intrinsically multilingual that different languages even seem to inhabit the same words. During the reading process, the reader moves back and forth between sounds and articulatory possibilities, where momentary incomprehension turns his or her attention to the sounding spheres of different languages, but also to the soundscapes of familiar ones. Rinne's poetry, therefore, points to the need for scholarly interest in this sounding sphere of literary multilingualism, to the need for us to listen more carefully when analysing not only literary multilingualism but also literature that traditionally has been regarded as monolingual.

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