Book Review


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The Genius of Language is a compilation of essays in which fifteen well-known English-language writers offer reflection on their multilingual heritage. As the editor’s preface states, the volume is neither a work of scholarship in the traditional sense, nor an attempt to produce a collection representative of the contemporary cross-cultural/linguistic memoir. The essays were assembled via “convenience sampling,” so to speak, since the editor simply invited contributions from writers whose work she admired. Furthermore, the notion that there might be rules for inclusion of particular essayists quickly broke down as the editor discovered the broad range of ways in which heritage languages and varieties come to influence modern-day lives. Thus the volume includes stories of geographic exile in childhood, such as Gary Steyngart’s emigration to the United States from the Soviet Union, but also accounts of border crossings undertaken in adulthood, such as Bert Keizer’s romantic and intellectual pursuit of English both within and outside the Netherlands. There are also stories of home-based childhood bilingualism by Amy Tan, of the drive to recover a forgotten childhood language by Ariel Dorfman, and of turning away from self-expression in English as a forceful, deliberate political and personal choice, by Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who now writes in Gikuyu. The essayists also offer nostalgic contemplation of disappearing family languages, such as Leonard Michaels’ Yiddish, or the Older Scots that James Campbell never learned to speak.

Despite the variety of circumstances and lived experience detailed in the volume, in every case the essays become meditations on childhood, the passing of time, and the personal meaning of physical, social, and psychological borders (or perhaps, bridges) crossed. In this way the authors illuminate widely shared human experience while focusing on that which is unique to the lives of multilinguals, particularly the subjective experience of a plural self, capable of existence in more than one fundamental way. In this collection, as elsewhere in contemporary linguistic memoirs, we find evidence of the “Janus complex” noted in his own linguistic memoir by Claude Esteban (1990, p. 95). Janus, the Roman god of beginnings and endings, is represented with a double-faced head, with each face looking in opposite directions. Janus presided over major life transitions and historical movements, providing Esteban with an apt metaphor portraying the psychology of multilingualism. Many writers struggle to sort out whether the plurality of multilingual subjectivity should be depicted as a painful division or as a generative multiplication.

Thus for example Salman Rushdie’s celebrated citation focuses on the loss inherent in being “out-of-language.” While it is self evident “that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity […] the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form…” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 12). In other linguistic memoirs, some writers dwell at length
on the loss of subjective unity represented by multilingualism. Esteban, for example, portrays his Spanish-French bilingualism as a “cruel dichotomy” (all translations from the French are mine) forcing his consciousness to “deviate from its natural progress by planting it is two mutually exclusive territories” (1991, p. 109). Todorov, in “Dialogism and schizophrenia” blames bilingualism for a feeling of generalized inauthenticity, since neither of his languages corresponds to his entire being (Todorov, 1994, p. 211). Even Nancy Huston writes at times of her voluntary exile as an experience of mutilation, guilt, and uncertainly, of the “terrifying magma of between-two-languages, where words do not mean, where they refuse to speak, where they begin to say one thing and end up saying something completely different” (Huston, 1999, p. 13).

While some emphasis on division and loss remains woven through the essays in the *Genius of Language*, the genius of its editor was to ask about the sources of writing in the autobiographical essays included. Here we find multilingualism cast not as a force of psychological discord but as a wellspring of literary creativity and a generator of profound satisfaction. Like other works of highly talented second language users, the volume therefore contributes important insights within the current effort to rewrite multilingualism, framing it not as a deficit in comparison to a putative ideal monolingual speaker, but rather as a set of repertoires, unique to each person, developed through processes of language socialization in response to the environment and to personal needs (Pavlenko, 2005). In cultivating communicative repertoires, second language users discover the “privilege of the non-native speaker” (Kramsch, 1997) to imagine oneself anew, to explore novel semiotic resources and their contrast with the old, and to make of language use a personal, creative performance.

For many of the essayists, it was reportedly the crossing of boundaries that made writers of them in the first place. They have confronted the process of defamiliarization accompanying language learning and used it as a source of inspiration. They have profited from tension between the norms of standard language and their own capacity to see through those norms and to challenge them in creative ways. Bharati Mukherjee, for example, writes: “I inherited a mother tongue charged with contradictions and nuances. The capacity of diction to imply opposite meanings has fed me even as I write fiction in English.” (p. 17). For Nicholas Papandreou, “the friction of the two languages (Greek and English) had great value and could convert the trivial into the metaphorically rich” (p. 124). M.J. Fitzgerald traces the beginnings of her career as a writer to the moment when she realized that her ambition was to write English with an Italian accent (p. 140).

*The Genius of Language* may be read for the pure pleasure of elegant prose and vicarious experience of others’ lives in language. It offers a powerful antidote to the deficit model of the non-native speaker, and therefore deserves the attention of language educators and second language researchers. For specialists in heritage language learning, the volume offers useful insights into the uniqueness of personal relationships to language while also illustrating the ways in which language use, and our dispositions toward it, are shaped by sociopolitical and cultural environments. By focusing on highly successful and accomplished second language users who maintain close emotional and artistic
connections to their linguistic heritage, the volume helps readers to appreciate the emotional resonance associated with multilingual repertoires and the aesthetic dimensions of heritage language use.

References