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AUTHOR Mackey, William F.
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ABSTRACT

The extension of languages across cultural boundaries engenders a cosmopolitan literature which is often characterized by the effects of biculturalism. The evidence seems to indicate that bilingualism and biculturalism can exert a subtle influence upon a writer's choice of words, and can penetrate the author's style and grammar. Most of the resulting difficulties for the bilingual writer come from the need to think about and express in one language concepts that come from another language. In other words, the writer finds himself within a thought-language-culture triangle, part of which overlaps another culture. This overlapping creates conflicts in the expression of certain culture-bound concept categories which may differ in both the diversity of what they cover and the depth or intensity to which they cover it. These differences in diversity and intensity may be analyzed and measured. Examples chosen primarily from French and English literature illustrate devices which bilingual writers use in their attempt to escape the influence of the other language or the other culture around him. (Author/AMH)

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LITERARY BICULTURALISM AND THE THOUGHT-LANGUAGE-CULTURE RELATION

WILLIAM F. MACKEY

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Introduction

In this paper I shall attempt to examine the effects of the extension of languages across cultural boundaries upon the problems of creative authors writing within bicultural contexts, particularly the conflicts caused by their thought-language-culture relationships. To begin with, let us take a look at some of the causes and effects of the extension of languages.

1. The Extension of Languages

Of all the forces which result in the extension of languages over wide areas of the globe, few are inherently linguistic. If, for example, the English language is one of the most widely used languages in the world today, it did not achieve this position through any virtue of its own. As a language, English is no more important to the linguist than are any of the other 4,000-odd languages still being used in various parts of the world. The English language does not, moreover, have a monopoly of the world's knowledge — and, indeed, it never did. It was for this reason that John Milton urged his countrymen to learn other languages, particularly Italian, which was the dominant language in his day. We know, for example, that both Mary Stuart and the first Queen Elizabeth had even written some of their dispatches in that language. Queen Elizabeth's great literary contemporary was really writing in a language which was not the dominant one of the time. And less than two centuries before, one could argue that none of the works of Chaucer would have been written in English had their author been born only a generation earlier.

The present extension of the English language throughout the world prevents many of us from realizing that the language could very well have become extinct as early as the ninth century of era, had the Scandinavian invaders occupying most of England at the time, and the settlers who followed them been more numerous. The fact is that the expansion of English as a world language is of fairly recent date. In the 17th Century, for example, who would for one moment have believed that English would be spoken by more people than Italian, French, Spanish and German combined? Certainly not men like Francis Bacon, who declared (in his Novum Organum) that when men were better educated the English language would become obsolete. And Richard Mulcaster, master of the better-known Edmund Spencer, describing the linguistic situation of his time, wrote, in 1582 — and I quote him: "Our English tongue is of small reach, stretching no further than this island, and not there over all."

The extension of the English language was a by-product of the expansion of immigration, commerce and colonization — mostly during the 18th and 19th centuries. The language was not extended through imposition, no more than were Greek and Latin, two thousand years earlier, when these languages were alive as imperial tongues. In both cases the language was offered as a privilege; for it was on language rather than on nationality or race that the classical imperialism was based.

The origins of these great classical languages were even humbler than those of English. The Latin language was first spoken by a small tribe of farmers living in a tiny corner of Latium in territory occupied and dominated by their enemies, the Estruscans. Under such conditions, it could very well have become extinct, as did so many of the languages which were spoken in Italy before the 7th Century, B.C. But the Latin language followed the fortunes of the Romans and spread steadily for about 500 years until it was known throughout the length and breadth of Italy. And following the legions of Rome, it further extended its dominion, during another 500 years, into parts of Europe which are now called Spain, France, Belgium and Rumania, where it displaced the local languages, and it even became, for some time, the usual language as far afield as the periphery of the Roman Empire, including in its span both North Africa and Great Britain.[1]

2. The Cosmopolitanism of Literatures

During this millennium of Roman expansion, we must not however imagine that everyone in the occupied territories succeeded in learning Latin, nor that those who did so had mastered the language overnight while forgetting their own mother tongue. No. This was rather a millennium of multilingualism — of transitional bilingualism from one native language to another. And many of the leading men of that era were, of necessity, bilingual — even the great writers of the Roman Empire who forged literary Latin into the refined instrument it became. In fact, the first known Latin author was no Roman: he was a Greek slave, Livius Andronicus, who composed a Latin version of the Odyssey. Even the earliest Roman writers were seldom Roman by birth. Seneca, Quintillian, Lucan and Martial were all from Spain; so were several of the later writers like Orosius, Prudentius and, of course, Isidore of Seville. Even Virgil, Catullus, Livy and the two Plinys were not of Roman blood; they were all of Celtic origin. Ovid and Horace were both Oscan. Cicero of Volscian, and Varro was from Gaul. And just as non-Romans wrote the classical literature that was the glory of Rome, non-Arabs like the Persians, wrote great literature in Arabic at the time when that language was dominant over a wide area of the world.[1]

I am re-iterating all this to make the point that, not only has language little respect for ethnic, national, racial, cultural or religious boundaries; nor has literature. For cosmopolitanism in literature is normal. If a writer is a member of a minority in an area where the dominant language is not his mother tongue, it is not surprising if the language of wider communication should become a means for him to reach the audience of the area, and if possible, beyond. It is not impossible that the Irish playwright J.M. Singe and the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas could have developed into writers working in their native languages only; but they chose to work in English. So did Tagore in India and Smuts in South Africa. The reason, one might argue, is that they were citizens of the Commonwealth. I think it is simply because English had become one of the great world languages. Why have writers whose first and best language was such well-known tongues as French, Spanish, and Russian, elect to write in English? I am referring to Frenchmen like Ernest Dimnet and Jacques Barzun, to

native Spanish speakers like George Santayana and Salvador de Madariaga, to native Slavs like Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Conrad. Perhaps the answer is the audience.

Cosmopolitanism in literature, however, is not limited to English; other writers have chosen French. The Spanish speaking poet José-Maria Heredia did his writing in French. So did the Fleming Maeterlinck and the great Leibnitz before him; not to mention the efforts of the Irish, from Oscar Wilde to Samuel Becket. Writing in a second language or dialect is not only normal; the practice is spreading. And with the tremendous rise in the mobility of people, it is bound to increase, not only in the Commonwealth, but throughout the world.

Cosmopolitanism in literature rests on a substratum of bilingualism and biculturalism, which are seldom, if ever, without their effect upon the literary production. It is this effect which I should like now to examine.

3. Effects of Language Extension upon Literature

It has often been stated that bilingualism is detrimental to literary creation. No less an authority than the great creolist, Hugo Schuchart put it this way. "If a bilingual man has two strings to his bow, both are rather slack." And the rhetorical question of the well-known Danish Anglicist, Otto Jespersen has also been quoted to support the adverse effects of bilingualism on literature. Jespersen asks, "Has any bilingual child ever developed into a great artist in speech?"

My answer is, yes. And the evidence just supplied on cosmopolitanism in literature seems to prove it. That does not mean, however, that a bilingual author who writes in his other language does not have problems because of it. Although his second language may be a literary asset, as when the native cliché translates as a stylistic innovation into the other language, it can also be the cause of numerous problems of literary expression — many of them unconscious.

The most obvious are those of the foreign word coming to mind before the word of the language in which the author is writing. But a writer who is literate in two languages is generally capable of keeping his two vocabularies apart. In fact, most bilingual writers are quite sensitive to the danger of intermixture; and some of them even develop into uncompromising purists — refusing to make use of foreign words which have already been established in the usage of unilingual writers. This is also true of bidialectalism in literature. We know, for example, that even Washington Irving was afraid of using an Americanism.

In spite of his consciousness of the danger, however, the bilingual writer, for reasons which I shall later explain, never entirely escapes the influence of the other language or of the other culture which surrounds him, since he is a prisoner of its pre-conceptions. But let us first examine the devices which bilingual writers use to get out of the trap — or to fool themselves into feeling that they are free from it.

Where the audience includes people whose everyday speech contains words taken from the other language, the bilingual writer, in trying to avoid the use of such words — either out of a desire to be understood beyond his borders or out of an unconscious struggle against lexical interference — such a writer may produce an effect quite different from the one he had intended. For example, take the case of North American authors writing in such languages as French, Italian, and Spanish, in none of which languages there are exact equivalents of such everyday North American concepts as job, boss, gang, tough, cute, etc. Although such notions may be quite usual in the everyday speech of their North American readers, often with such adaptations of the English original form, like une jobbe or la giobba, the writer who wishes to avoid such forms is faced with a real dilemma. If he elects to use only the forms of the standard language in which he is writing — not une jobbe, but rather un emploi, un métier, un travail, or une profession; not la giobba, but rather il empiego, il mestiere, il lavoro or la professione — then he is unlikely to convey the North American idea of work that is found without obligation of attachment or interest, including the product of such work (Il m'a fait une bonne jobbe.) And if, in spite of this, he still decides to stick to the standard forms, he may unwittingly fall into another trap, making use of the standard form in a borrowed phrase pattern or collocation — as have indeed done such Canadian novelists as Emile Gagnon who writes, for example, on page 40 of his novel Une fille est venue the sentence Il avait de l'emploi dans un magasin following the pattern of He had a job in a store instead of the standard French pattern of He was employed in a store (Il était employé dans un magasin.)[2]

Some bilingual writers get out of the dilemma by playing a foxy game where the stakes are always kept low. The game consists of conveying a well-known borrowed cultural notion belonging to what will later be included in the concepts of high intensity, not by the foreign word usual in the speech of his readers, but by a term which is completely acceptable in the standard language in which he is writing. The catch is that this term is not a very well known word either in the standard language or in the speech of the readers; it can therefore be easily tampered with. What the bilingual writer does is simply to make an imperceptible extension of the accepted meaning of the word, and no one ever notices it. For example, in North America it has been said that you have to have push to get by, but without getting too pushy — especially if you don't have any pull, It is almost impossible to convey this notion of push and/pushy in standard French, since any word in the usual repertoire, whether it be dynamisme or débrouillardise, just does not cover the subject. How did the famous Canadian novelist Ringuet (pen name of Philippe Panneton) get out of this dilemma in his novel, Le poids du jour? The problem becomes evident on page 359 of this novel. The author solved his problem by using a rather rare standard French word, entregent, not really meaning push or pushy, but with the accepted sense of "worldly wisdom". His readers, however, gathered from the context that it meant something akin to the American "to have plenty of push" — and no one seemed any the worse for this slight extension in meaning.[2]

If, however, the bilingual writer refuses to revive a dying vocabulary in order to save his reputation, and limits himself to simple, usual words, he may then fall into still another trap. The catch here is that his simple word may cover much more ground than does the concept he is trying to convey. In the language of the North American superhighway, for example, no matter how you pass someone on the road, you simply pass him — on the left, head on, or far beyond. In French, however, the way you pass him makes an obligatory difference, depending on whether you are passing on one side (doubler), passing head on (croiser), or going beyond (dépasser). Not one of these terms covers the ground of the English word pass, which by the way, can also be applied to passing an examination, passing at cards, or even passing out. The French cognate of this form, the verb passer, also covers a lot of ground; but it does not cover the same ground. By making it cover the same ground, the bilingual writer may well be using an equally simple and usual word to convey the concept he has in mind — as does Roger Lemelin in Au pied de la pente douce (p. 95); but he does not convey the precision that readers of the standard language expect and often creates sentences that are ambiguous to some of the native speakers of the language.[2]

Other bilingual writers solve the problem by using both terms — one from each language. For example, in Germaine Guèvremont's novel Marie-Didace (p. 61), the borrowed word peddleur is followed by the standard French word colporteur. This device is of great antiquity; it was well known in England during the Middle Ages. And examples of such French-English bilingual doublets can be found in the English literature of the period, from the Ancrene Riwle of the year 1225 or thereabouts, where we find such phrases as ignoraunce, that is, unwisdom, through Chaucer, right up to the time of Caxton (glasse or mirrour). On the whole, therefore, the evidence seems to indicate that bilingualism and biculturalism can exert a subtle influence upon a writer's choice of words.

The influence, however, goes far beyond the words of the language in which the author is writing, for it penetrates his style and even his grammar. When it does, the influence is more subtle and much more likely to escape his notice. It would lead us too far afield to go into this matter here. If time permitted, one could supply from the works of nearly any non-English North American writer citations in the use of prepositions, gerunds, participles, infinitives, structural adverbs, compound adjectives, concordance of tenses, and collocations to illustrate the subtle influence of the other language. As a consequence, some bilingual writers suffer from an ill-defined feeling of linguistic insecurity — at least in one of their languages. Unexpectedly, surprising gaps may be found in the vocabulary of one of their languages, as illustrated in the amazement voiced by G.K. Chesterton when he realized that Joseph Conrad, at the height of his literary fame, did not know the English word cad — although he could have used a seemingly suitable equivalent in the word scoundrel.

Most of these difficulties of bilingual writers come from the need to express in one language concepts that come to them from another — not only to express them but even to think about them. This situation creates fundamental problems caused by the inextricable relationship of thought, language and culture.

4. Causes in the Thought-Language-Culture Relationship

When speaking of the thought of the creative writer, we are using a vague term which can cover at least half a dozen distinctly identifiable mental processes. Most of these processes are admittedly not affected by the language or culture of the writer and, indeed, may very well be universal. They include such processes as perception, that is, the activity of receiving impressions from outside one's self, memory, the storing up of such impressions, cognition, the identifying of an impression or family of impressions, problem solving, the combination of the above to arrive at answers to questions, and anticipation, the integration of what is stored in the mind and the directing of it toward a specific outcome. All such mental processes may well be universal.

If all these thought processes are common to all creative writers, this does not mean that none of their mental activities are dependent upon the language they use or the culture to which they belong. At least two other mental processes are related to culture and to language. First, there is the process of evaluation seen in such activities as value judgment, the making and reference to degrees of quality in the impressions received, the values felt in the characteristics and activities observed in others — characteristics such as honesty and cleanliness, activities such as work and play. This mental process seems to be fashioned for the writer by the culture in which he was raised, and modified by those with which he has come into contact.

The other mental process — much more important for literature and one which accounts for most of the examples just cited of English-French influence — is that of conception, the representation in the mind of classes of impressions. Since most of the labels given to these classes of impressions are language labels, conception is related to the particular language which the writer happens to be using; and this language, along with its ready-made labels, has been moulded out of the culture of the peoples who have used it. Conception is therefore dependent on language, and language on culture.

5. The Conflict of Concept Categories in Language and Culture

In order to see where we are going, it would be a good idea to begin with the basic assumptions with which we started. From the physical bases of concept categories, I should like to go on to their evolution in time and space, their diversity and intensity, and the use of these variables in the measurement of differences between cultures.

It has been said that all human behaviour is rooted in biology and channeled through cultures. This is because all creatures, including man, must of necessity inhabit some sort of environment. In order to exist in this environment, they devise ways of dealing with it, since they may both be affected by it and have an effect upon it. The environment of man is varied and changeable; to deal with it he has evolved a traditional guide to his behaviour, which includes such things as what he eats and wears, how he gets his food and clothing, the tools and techniques he uses, his relations with his fellows, and the institutions, customs, laws and beliefs which enable him to work with his fellow man. This guide to behaviour, enabling man to deal with his environment, and all it includes, is largely acquired and retained through traditional conceptual categories, most of which may be transmitted through language. The language provides the acoustic or visual forms through which the categories are coded for use in communication. It is through the language that we can get at these conceptual categories, since language is one of the ways through which man arbitrarily groups his impressions of object, events and other phenomena so that he can think and talk about them.[3]

These groupings of mental impressions into the categories of a particular language are achieved by the devices which that language may have at its disposal — words, phrases, grammatical units and even intonation features. In most languages words do the bulk of the categorization, simply because there are so many of them. Some of these words are labels for groups of notions, ideas, attitudes and relationships which may have no direct counterpart in the physical world. Many of the words, however, represent the groupings of physical phenomena observable in nature — actions like walking and eating, objects like trees and stones, and situations like meeting and leave-taking.

Such groupings into concept categories are by no means permanent in any living language; they vary in time and space. Old words disappear and new ones are born. Old words also may become labels for new, expanded or entirely different concepts. On the other hand, the concepts themselves may take on new shapes and sizes as the environment which they reflect evolves. The most stable areas of human environment, however, represent the most stable categories; the parts of the body are more stable than the things used to clothe them. Therefore, concept categories used in one area would presumably change if the people using them were to settle in another. The change would be a measure of the difference in the environment.[3]

As a test of this hypothesis, we have examined and compared the concept categories in France with those in Acadia. After more than two centuries of complete separation and absolute lack of contact, the two French-speaking groups have at last come together, especially since the post-war rapprochement, only to realize that while using a mutually comprehensible language, they did not belong to the same and identical culture. This is clearly reflected in the evolution of their concept categories. This divergent evolution can be seen in the changes which these categories undergo in the diversity of what they cover and in the intensity with which they cover it.

Diversity is a measure of the number of concept categories into which a culture has divided its environment. It can be computed by counting the number and extent of such distinctions. For example, if we were to make a language atlas of the luscious island of Jamaica, one would presumably gather a great number of words for the many plants and trees which abound on the island; but few words for features like ice and snow which are exclusive to cold climates. A few years ago, I was on a much larger island than this, half a world away, in which there were no trees and hardly any vegetation at all, since it was situated entirely in the arctic. The native language of this island, which is called Baffin Land, is a type of Eskimo. And in this language, after much questioning, I was unable to find any words for trees or for any of the plants with which we are all familiar in English. Yet I was able to record fully 21 different words for significant conceptual distinctions between types of snow and ice — some of them quite untranslatable into any Western European language, except by long sentences. It seems therefore that the diversity of concept categories is a measure of the degrees of difference between two environments, and these categories would be reflected in the thought and works of any writer using the language of the culture in which such distinctions are compulsory. But if the concept categories of cultures differ in their diversity, they also vary in intensity.

Since the continuum of culture is co-terminous neither with nationality nor with language, it is not sufficient to say that a concept category exists in one culture and not in another, either with one name or with many. The degree of importance or intensity of the concept category must also be known, especially if we are dealing with literatures written in transplanted languages. The concept of wine, for example, is known both in France and in North America. But it is much more important in the culture of France than it is in that of any part of North America; and the degree of difference has been measured through tests of concept availability given to representative samples of populations separated by two cultures but united by the same language. Although measures have been established for dozens of such categories, a great deal of work remains to be done before we can obtain anything like a complete picture of differences in the intensity of concept categories in any two cultures.[4]

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to make the following points:

1. The extension of languages across cultural boundaries engenders a cosmopolitan literature which is often characterized by the effects of biculturalism.

2. These effects are caused by the fact that the writer finds himself within a thought-language-culture triangle, part of which overlaps another culture.

3. This overlaping creates conflicts in the expression of certain culture-bound concept categories which may differ in both the diversity of what they cover and the depth or intensity to which they cover it.

4. These differences may not only be analysed; they may also be measured.

It is to be hoped that interest in the study of conflicting concept categories will be sufficient to warrant further research in this area, touching as it does our understanding, not only of world literature, but that of all human expression.

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