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with/in languages – a pretty pathetic

An artist talk

Annie Abrahams

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Revue Hybrid

with/in languages – a pretty pathetic

An artist talk

Annie Abrahams

PATHETIC: MERIAM WEBSTER

- 1 1: having a capacity to move one to either compassionate or contemptuous pity
- 2 2: marked by sorrow or melancholy: sad
- 3 3: pitifully inferior or inadequate
- 4 4: absurd, laughable

PATHETIC: DICTIONARY.COM

- 5 - causing or evoking pity, sympathetic sadness, sorrow, etc.
- 6 - affecting or moving the emotions.
- 7 - pertaining to or caused by the emotions.
- 8 - miserably or contemptibly inadequate

PATHETIC: CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY

- 9 causing feelings of sadness, sympathy, or sometimes lack of respect, especially because a person or an animal is suffering.
- 10 Fig. 1

© Suncan Stone.

Fig. 2

Performance *Kaj misliš s tem?/What do you mean?* 17 April 2014, Metelkova, Ljubljana.

© Suncan Stone.

- 11 On April 17th 2014 the performance *Kaj misliš s tem?/What do you mean?* took place at Kult3000, Metelkova in Ljubljana. Annie Abrahams, Martina Rusham, Jana Wilcoxon, and Chantal van Mourik wrote about their experience of living in a country where they couldn't speak their mother tongue and had to learn a new language. They used a shared writingpad. While writing only in their mother tongue, they translated their text, phrase by phrase, via Google in Slovenian.

- 12 The Slovenian text was fed by the same performers to Alpineon's TTS software made by Proteus and diffused live to the audience. Brane Zorman of CONA recorded the sound.

Audio file 1

- 13 What do you mean

Sound *Kaj Misliš S Tem (What Do You Mean)* as presented in the exhibition *Mie lahkoo pomagati ? (can you help me ?)* 21/10-7/11 2014, Aksioma Project Space, Ljubljana.

- 14 The 30-minute performance used a ReadingClub pad: a version of etherpad adapted by Clément Charmet. On the website of the ReadingClub you can still visit the cinematic archive of this writing.¹ Here is a screen capture of the writing in progress:

Fig. 3

Screenshot of the writing in progress during the performance *Kaj misliš s tem?/What do you mean?*

- 15 After the performance Milena Gros, who didn't attend it, transcribed the sound (or at least that what she could understand of it) in Slovenian. When Google translated her transcription in English, I had a poem called "You have to accept (a FEW times). New language." You can find the poem here: <https://e-stranger.tumblr.com/post/89970789401/>.

No, I have not experienced it. 3X
 I said: They say. I said: They say. Your people speak English with you.
 ... speaking Slovenian.
 And they killed me (a few times).
 Now I understand, this one is not the same.
 Avast. Virus database has been updated. And they killed me.
 Well.
 I have all the time in conversation with a child in Slovenian.
 This is very foreign ...
 When the Dutch with their children and friends children ... that have me ...
 I feel like an idiot.
 ... that I will ... something very different.
 In particular, I feel like an idiot when I'm joking and no one understands me in the language.
 Culture ...

Jan, kids ... when I speak Slovenian with them as if they were from another planet.
 I also feel like an idiot. When I'm mad at someone, especially someone I not do
 know very well, who must express his discontent in the Slovenian language.
 It's hard to follow this conversation ... I'm confused. Children ...
 Sometimes I am confused between the two ... languages ... brain I became happy
 unless I do
 not believe except quietly.
 Sometimes I am confused between two foreign languages ... brain I became words,
 except I do not believe, except quiet.
 I will ... end with a pretty pathetic.
 ... strong position I was trying to assert my power in the situation and because the
 believing well enough that ... quite strong.
 I'm sorry, that for some things are so bizarre set to anything but ...

- 16 The complete poem has been published in *from estranger to e-stranger - Living in between languages*.² This book, produced as part of a residency, where I investigated different attitudes toward language and problematised how its expressivity is structured when placed in a new environment, is a compilation of 77 posts I wrote between April and August 2014 on a research website called *(E)stranger*.³ This research is still ongoing.

Ik ben mijn moedertong verloren, toen ik, 12 jaar oud voor het eerst naar de school
 in de grote stad ging. Ze spraken daar “anders” en drie dagen heb ik niks gezegd
 totdat ik eindelijk mijn eerste woorden in hoog Nederlands, ABN, Algemeen
 Beschaafd Nederlands durfde spreken. In drie dagen werd ik geciviliseerd – en
 verlegen. Ik volgde de regels en aangezien mijn vader een strikte strenge man was,
 werd mijn moedertong een koude veeleisende vadertong.
 Mijn vader was niet koud.
 Nederlands is **niet mijn taal**
 What am I talking about? What is this voice? Was sage ich?
 Nederlands is **niet mijn taal**

- 17 While reading this Dutch text I show a slide with the following French text:

Les mots qui définissent les sentiments sont très vagues; il vaut mieux éviter leur
 emploi et s'en tenir à la description des objets, des êtres humains, et de soi-même,
 c'est-à-dire à la description fidèle des faits.
 Agota Kristof, *Le Grand Cahier*, 1986.⁴

- 18 Andrea Timar in *The Murder of the Mother Tongue*. Agota Kristof's *The Notebook* tells how for Agota Kristof, a Hungarian exile, French appears to embody the name of the Father, or the Law... In Kristof's autobiography, suggestively entitled *L'analphabet* (2004), she calls French “une langue ennemie,” which is “en train de tuer [sa] langue maternelle.”⁵
- 19 Still, Agota has written the acclaimed and much translated *La Trilogie des jumeaux* in French. She flees sentimental writing and keeps to a factual language.

Fig. 4

Screencapture from an interview by Günter Gaus.

- 20 In 1964, when interviewed by Günter Gaus, I thought Hannah Arendt told us “Wenn man abgeschnitten ist von seinen Muttersprache, wenn man die vergessen hat, dann bekommt man eine neue Sprache wo ein cliché das andere jagt.”⁶ But now when writing this final text (June 2020) listening again to her, I realise I misunderstood her. She meant exactly the opposite “Wenn man fest halt an seinen Muttersprache, wenn man die nich vergessen kann, dann bekommt man eine neue Sprache wo ein cliché das andere jagt.”

I don't agree, I don't agree. I don't agree, Nein nein nein.

We leerden ook frans, duits en engels ook via regels (en lijstjes).

I am not this voice that speaks – je ne suis pas la voix qui vous parle - Ich bin nicht diese Stimme die hier spricht. Ik ben niet diegene die hier spreekt.

Ik hield niet van talen ...

totdat ik naar het buitenland ging.

In Frankrijk duurde het tien lange jaren, tien jaren vonden mensen mij dom en stom. Vaak letterlijk stom, en dus ook oninteressant, ...

- 21 Then I turn my back to the audience and continue:

I'm invisible, I'm exotic, unidentifiable, blurry, fuzzy, shifty, rude, vulgar, uncouth, rough, crude, insolent, naive and alienated,

I am queer, I am hybrid, complex, malleable, pliable, often alone, silent, distorted, deformed, subversive, lonely.

Sometimes I am also abject, offensive, often incomprehensible and impolite.

I speak a broken tongue, my tongue is bastard, wobbly, twisted, turned, tortoise, torte, tortuous.

An e-stranger lives between cultures, is nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

We are complex, translated (woe)men, we know a silent period, our literature is a minor literature, we have mother- and father tongues, we like the post-

monolingual, we practice a third language, we are een vreemde in eigen land, we are lost in translation, we are the fractured, the disrupted, the in-betweens
 we are harder and more fragile at the same time, we do not have a single language, we are more resilient, more inventive, we know how to protect ourselves, are good observers... we belong to nothing and to no one. Nobody can demand anything from us, no one can claim us.

22 Facing the audience again:

Our tongue is free.

23 Silence.

Dumb and stupid and until, one day there were no more taboos, maybe it was when I discovered the internet in 1996, and started translating between French and English (and Dutch) in my hypertext works and ..., received appreciation for that from both camps.

I learned that to translate one's own texts is to re-think them and that literal translation doesn't exist.

24 “Is code a language? Of course. A non-sensuous one? One can use it without understanding – copy-paste and watch it performing. Just like maths, if you know the rules, you don’t have to understand.”

25 While showing a slide with the above text I continue:

Or was it when I wanted to learn code and started a masters in programming in 1999. After four months, despite A grades, I stopped. I could perform but didn’t understand. I knew how to follow the rules and how to produce the unexpected through code. Although very inspiring, it was not what interested me. I turned out to be more analog than digital, more interested in how languages move the world than how to move language.

26 In the only surviving recording of Virginia Woolf’s voice, a part of a BBC radio broadcast series entitled “Words fail me” from April 29th, 1937, Virginia says:⁷

1 min 36 s - In order to use new words properly you would have to invent a new language...

3 min 28 s - It is words that are to blame. They are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things.

6 min 34 s - In short, they hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change.

7 min 38 s - And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die.

Fig. 5

For Murakami, the shift to writing in English instead of Japanese was straight-forward. He had just completed his first kitchen-table novel and found the final result to be lacklustre. As he describes it, his thoughts were simply too complex and when he tried to put them on paper 'the system crashed.' For this reason, Murakami chose to

Image via PhotoPin

rewrite the opening of his novel in English, despite his limited abilities in English composition. But it was precisely the limitations of writing in a foreign language that removed the obstacles he faced trying to write in his native one; unable to pen complex thoughts in English, he discovered that his language became more simplified and free of unnecessary components. He began to find his rhythm and learned that trying to impress in his native tongue by forcing himself to write a beautiful phrase was actually making him a worse writer instead of a better one.

Screencapture from "The Murakami model: Why do writers like writing in foreign languages?," Katie Collom, 2016.⁸

My ears heard more, I became more flexible, my brain more sensible. No longer bounded by one language area, I could move in several. No(t) more borders, no(t) more nations, no one could claim me anymore. I started to enjoy multi-linguism and didn't consider myself handicapped anymore. Even "not knowing a language perfectly" became something positive. Even stuttering was allowed.

- 27 After reading the above I ask someone from the audience to read the following text: (if possible very rhythmically)

Fig. 6

This is the template for the language I would like to communicate in, a language that is not policed by formerly imperial, newly global corporations, nor by national statistics—a language that takes on and confronts issues of circulation, labor, and privilege (or at least manages to say something at all), a language that is not a luxury commodity nor a national birthright, but a gift, an excess or waste, made between Skopje and Saigon by interns and non-resident aliens on Emoji keyboards. To opt for International Disco Latin also means committing to a different form of learning, since disco also means "I learn," "I learn to know," "I become acquainted with"—preferably with music that includes heaps of accents. And for free. And in this language, I will always prefer anus over bonus, oral over moral, Satin over Latin, shag over shack. You're welcome to call this pornographic, discographic, alienating, or simply weird and foreign. But I suggest: Let's take a very fucking English lesson!

Screencapture from "International Disco Latin," Hito Steyerl, 2013.⁹

- 28 Watch the video

This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/739>

Lou Sarabadzic reads Hito Steyerl, Annie Abrahams dances, video by Erika Fulop.

- 30 "If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story," *When our Lips Speak Together*, Luce Irigaray, 1980.¹⁰

- 31 The above citation of Irigaray is projected when I continue with:

Being, accepting, living a multilingualism is a political feminist stand. Nowadays I am very much interested in and intrigued by the feminist scholar Karen Barad, who

uses quantum physics to articulate a feminist view on the philosophy of science. I don't really understand her, but I learned to prefer diffractive thinking, reading and even writing above reflexive (reflection only displaces/mirrors, never brings a radical new viewpoint – Barad is building on Donna Haraway).¹¹ I prefer to talk about intra-action instead of interaction, and moved from a being in the world to an entangled worlding.¹²

- 32 Short silence. The citation of Irigaray stays visible.
- 33 I met Jan Kruse in December 2015 during a residency called *unaussprechbarlich* in Villa Waldberta in Feldafing, Germany. He is a linguist and philosopher interested in the language policy of the European Union. He told me that in some cantons in Switzerland all institutional meetings have to be prepared in German, French and Italian (sometimes also in Romansh) and that research showed, that when all participants continue to use their mother tongue (translated when necessary), the result is of higher quality than when only one language is used. I started to look for proof.
- 34 Jan Kruse generously allowed me to cite freely from the article "Dichotomies in european language history and possible effects on EU language policy" he sent me.¹³

Everyone speaks English, so **you** can easily travel and communicate **without learning other languages**. In a democracy, language has the function to let people participate in political life. Language is an instrument of public thinking In a democracy, non-understanding is not tolerable (Trabant 2002).

There is a discrepancy between Europe's language policy and politics, which support a trilingual policy, whereas **not even half of the European population claims to speak English** (Kruse 2012).

All 24 official languages have equal status; nevertheless, the language used in most situations in EU institutions is English (Kruse/Ammon 2013).

English as a foreign language is commonly spoken by the **elite(s)** (Kruse 2012, 2014).

Foreign language knowledge today is regionally and socially highly inhomogeneous.

The Euroregions make efforts towards an **equal treatment** of the member languages and use practically **no English** in negotiations (Kruse 2014).

- 35 In *Imprisoned in English. The Hazards of English as a Default Language*, Prof. Anna Wierzbicka, a Polish linguist, Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University of Canberra, opposes scholars' thoughtless use of English. In their articles they often claim universal knowledge in English while a lot of the concepts used, don't exist in the original language, that are their subjects of thought.¹⁴ An example: "bleu" is not a word in Polish. Some languages have no word for "brother," others not for "right" and "wrong." In an interview with Prof. James Underhill she says:

English is not an international language and it is wrong that scholars use it as if it is.

Describing diversity is impossible if you use English, you need a metalanguage.

Depression is an English concept. NSM makes it possible to talk about it.¹⁵

- 36 NSM (Natural Semantic Metalanguage) has 65 semantic primes/ basic concepts.¹⁶

Fig. 7

Category ↕	Primes ↕
Substantives	I, YOU, SOMEONE, PEOPLE, SOMETHING/THING, BODY
Relational Substantives	KIND, PART
Determiners	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE~ANOTHER
Quantifiers	ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH/MANY, LITTLE/FEW
Evaluators	GOOD, BAD
Descriptors	BIG, SMALL
Mental predicates	THINK, KNOW, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech	SAY, WORDS, TRUE
Actions, Events, Movement	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence, Possession	BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING), (IS) MINE
Life and Death	LIVE, DIE
Time	WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
Space	WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH (CONTACT)
Logical Concepts	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Intensifier, Augmentor	VERY, MORE
Similarity	LIKE/AS/WAY

List of English exponents of semantic primes.

- 37 When I analyse my own, mostly collaborative work, it is not really clear what is causing what, where the agency exactly is – not between clearly distinguishable entities, but coming from within a whole, where interface characteristics, server conditions, individual computers, keyboards, webcams and sound devices, as well as the text, voices and images of the co-performers, local light conditions and family situations are all entangled in what Karen Barad would call the phenomenon. As I said before, it is not easy to understand her. So I was happy to find the video *Three Minute Theory. What is Intra-Action?* that explained what she means by Intra-Action.¹⁷

Thinking with intra-actions means giving up cause and effect relationships, individual agency and subject-object economies. We gain new understandings of ethics and justice as not things that are predetermined but always changing and unfolding. Intra-action calls into question steadfast boundaries and borders and linear time and in turn helps us think in terms of simultaneity. It tears down the walls that contain the disciplined thoughts and actions to reveal artificial boundaries we forgot we invented.

- 38 Other related phrases are still more or less enigmatic for me:

Entanglements are not unities. They do not erase differences; on the contrary, entanglings entail differentiatings, differentiatings entail entanglings. One move – cutting together-apart.¹⁸

The diffractive moment is when such interpellations or affections happen. The surprise of an interpellation or of affect is taken to be a moment of insight that is of importance for the production of knowledge.¹⁹

- 39 I am not done with her ideas (I also need to read Whitehead and more Erin Manning), but so far, they helped me to formulate what I want my artistic projects to do. I want them to permit the appearance of creative and unexpected “outcomes,” that can be called in the words of Barad a cutting together-apart of new knowledge. Participants are part of an apparatus and become co-creators of a piece. They assist in an event that allows for diffractive moments – i.e. “a mapping of interference,” which take them out

of self-reflexivity, out of systemised subjectivity, out of a world that only reproduces what it knows already into an intra-active diffractive worlding.²⁰

40 Can there be a universal language?

41 When you are not allowed to use anything else, you can talk with laughter. Can you?

42 Listen the performance

43 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/739>

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NOTES

1. The ReadingClub is an online space for collective reading and writing performances organised by Annie Abrahams and Emmanuel Guez. Cinematic archive of *Kaj misliš s tem?/What do you mean?* [Online] <http://readingclub.fr/pad/534e4b31b0906911560005fa> [accessed 26 June 2020].

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ABSTRACTS

This article is the “archive” of a reading-performance delivered by Annie Abrahams at the Languages INTER Networks conference at Lancaster University on the 21st of June 2019. About languages, people, identities, words, and silence, in languages, images, sounds, and movement.

INDEX

Keywords: post-monolingual, intra-action, diffractive thinking, NSM natural semantic metalanguage, father, mother tongues, identities

AUTHOR

ANNIE ABRAHAMS

Annie Abrahams (born 1954) is a Dutch performance artist specialising in video installations and internet based performances, often deriving from collective writings and collective interaction. Born and raised in Hilvarenbeek in the Netherlands, she migrated to and settled in France in 1987. Her performance work challenges and questions the limitations and possibilities of online communication and collaboration.